



*This issue of Alpha Continuum
is dedicated to
all of the incredibly gifted people
whose work appears here despite a
"killer" deadline and other pressing
commitments, with heartfelt thanks.*



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Alpha

Continuum 4

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CONTENTS

Editorial	2
Year of the Cat, by Cheryl Rice and Mandi Schultz	3
Made for Each Other, by Annelaurie Logan	8
Wide Open Spaces, by Vicky Edgerton	19
K/S, by Dayle Palko	22
Visions, interpretations by Cheryl Rice, Donna Toutant, Daphne Ann Hamilton, Ingrid Cross, Mandi Schultz, April Pentland and Annelaurie Logan	23
Home Leave, by L. Jeanne Powers	51
Song of the Jellies, by April Pentland	52
Reunion, by Rusty Hancock	73
No Special Hurry, by Cheryl Rice and Mandi Schultz	80
Memento Mori, by Cheryl Rice	92

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You're in luck! This is going to be an incredibly short commentary by the guilty, because it's already past four in the morning, and this monster has to be in to the printers tomorrow (today??). No time for either cuteness or eloquence.

First, a thing or two about the materials herein. Two of the stories have appeared elsewhere, in somewhat different form: "Made for Each Other" in *Warped Space* #6, and "Memento Mori", in *Guardian* #2. Also, we have here two more chapters of the *Diamonds and Rust* series. One of them, "Year of the Cat" is simply a short vignette; the other, "No Special Hurry", is the ending for the series. *Diamonds and Rust* was originally intended to be a multi-volume project, volume one of which was published by Kzinti Press; however, other projects and commitments have forced those involved in the creation of the series to forgo completion of the project. "No Special Hurry" is intended to tie up a few loose ends, and to give some idea of events the series was to encompass.

Working on this issue of *Alpha* has been a . . . an interesting experience, at least what I can remember of it. Signe Jesson started collecting the material for it a year or so ago, only to discover that her work schedule wouldn't let her finish the zine. So, she turned it over to me to finish up and publish. Which is why I, along with fellow *fool's* stalwarts, am now seeing double. Fanzines, after all, are projects to be worked on in one's spare time. The only spare time we have around here is the time we really should be spending sleeping instead of fanac-ing. (This is why we'll have to beg your tolerance for any typographical errors that might appear here--in our condition, we're thrilled that the final product even resembles the English language--correctness of spelling is a minor detail.)

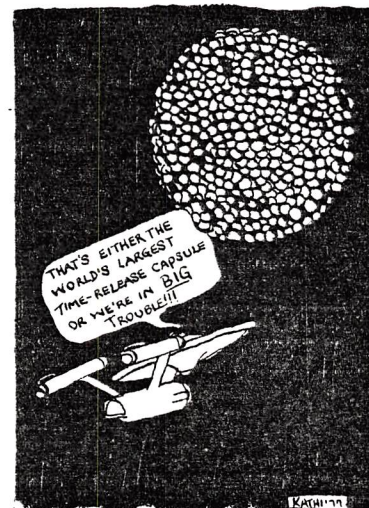
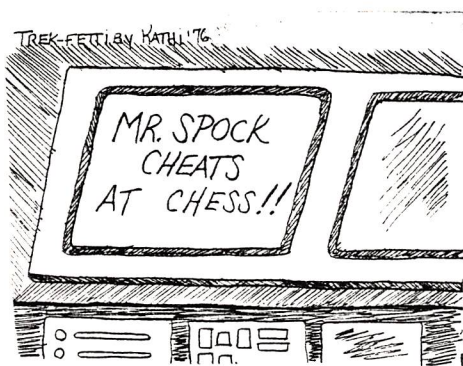
Ah, well . . . moving right along. This issue of *Alpha Continuum* is out of sequence (as some of the sharper readers out there have already noticed). It's out of sequence because *Alpha* #3--the Spock issue--hasn't been published yet (you knew there was a logical explanation, didn't you?). This issue was closer to completion, for various reasons, so we just decided to go ahead and print this one and confuse everyone. Worked, too. However, #3 should be out later in the year (have I said that before? oh, well. . .), good Lord willin' and the printing prices don't rise.

I sense a tendency to dither becoming ascendant here, so I believe I'll sign off here, and let you get on with your reading (there'll be a quiz next hour). Oh--a few people have wondered, out loud and occasionally in sharp tones, why I keep giving fanzines two names. I could say, I suppose, that it's because each zine's second name has a deep, intellectual or symbolic significance, understood only by those of most refined sensitivity. Or that I see the names written on the wall (cosmic graffiti). However, I suspect that the true reason lies in the fact that I keep working on these damned things until the wee hours of the morning, when *Alpha Continuum* seems all too boring a name, and unspellable and unpronounceable, to boot.

Just a Kirk--er, quirk--of nature.

Sorry about that. Enjoy the zine

Mat Signit



Year of the Cat

BY Mandi Schultz & Cheryl Rice

*On a morning from a Bogart movie
In a country where they turn back time. . .
She comes out of the sun in a silk dress
Running like a watercolor in the rain.
Don't bother asking for explanations
She'll just tell you that she came in the
Year of the Cat. . .*

His back was to her as she stepped onto the bridge through the opened doors of the turbolift, forgetting the man who stood beside her as the hum of activity suddenly surrounding her overwhelmed her senses. *Here at last*, she thought. She knew the man in the command chair must be Kirk. Surely with the *Enterprise* on yellow alert, that is where he would be.

The introductions were hasty at best and except for a sudden widening of his eyes she might have thought she had made no impression at all. Her job precluded the necessity of that, but her vanity protested.

James T. Kirk, man-about-the-galaxy. . ."Tomcat", Paul Caidan had called him. *How odd*, she mused, inconspicuously studying the face that was now turned in speech to the saturnine Vulcan standing beside him. She noted the Captain could use a shave, do to lose some weight, and frankly, to her tastes, was not all that interesting as far as his appearance was concerned. Though he was seated she was sure he would be noticeably shorter than she. Still, something caught her inner attention, tugged a bit, and forced her to consider him. His eyes. . .hazel with a twinkle, a spark. . .

The ship's surgeon was taking her arm and preparing to lead her away. Just as she stepped back, Kirk smiled at her. *He has the most beautiful smile I have ever seen in a human male*, she suddenly found herself thinking. *Now that is foolish, he is your commanding officer, nothing more, and one who is not likely to become overly fond of you.*

But that smile. . .

He looked up, annoyed at being interrupted, to acknowledge the introduction and make some kind of perfunctory comment to the new crewman. . .and immediately forgot what he was going to say. Towering next to him, blond hair plaited like a halo around her head, the new Security Chief smiled politely. Lt. Chantal Caberfae. Yes, he vaguely remembered receiving notice of her transfer to the *Enterprise* but crew members, especially in Security, arrived and departed so hastily at times that he tried to think about it as little as possible. He noted, for future reference, that the tailored look of her apparel somehow did not match the nearly exotic face, and his eyes strayed to the six-fingered hand that casually brushed a loose strand of hair behind an ear. He felt reluctant to meet her gaze, and that embarrassed him. Spock, on his other side, seemed to be awaiting a chance to speak. . .saved again.

He heard only part of whatever Spock was saying, being suddenly aware of a subtle perfume. . .it must be hers. Raising a hand to stop the Vulcan momentarily, he turned to Chantal again, only to see her stepping away with McCoy. She looked in his direction suddenly, as if she had felt his eyes. Reflexively, he smiled. She seemed surprised, off guard for an instant, then returned the gesture with a smile of her own. Even her eyes, gleaming-green as tourmaline, seemed to do so.

Chantal was running towards him, the sunlight playing on her hair that seemed to follow her on the wind like a platinum cloud. In the breeze her long dress clung to the shape of her body. . .outlining the small, pert breasts, fitting against the gently swelling hips, across the flat plane of belly, like an

*Some Lyrics by Al Stewart & Peter Wood
© In Japan Records 1976.*

practically worshipped that thing. I never was too sure if it was so holy because of its size or the glow it had. . .I'd heard about it, but seeing it for myself. . .that unearthly. . .no, that's not the word I want. . .ethereal, that's it. Deeper than emerald but still perfectly clear. Like her eyes. . .

When I can manage to look directly into them. . .that's something that seems to be happening less frequently all the time. Just being in the same room with her makes me twitchy. Like those Vane-green eyes were watching me constantly for errors so that she could so superiorly point them out to me. Or even worse, if they aren't watching me at all. . .

I used to have radar for women like her. . .something gave me warning and I could veer off before I foundered. Now I'm being sucked into a whirlpool even before the alarm is sounding. But what am I trying to save?

I feel like a complete idiot. Like I'm sixteen again. Like I'm older than the stars. I feel like the last time I went diving and came up too fast, blood pounding in my ears. . .

I have to resolve all this. Wish there were someone I could talk it over with. Bones. . .maybe? Spock? Easy, Jim. . .get serious. Think of it this way. . .she's a woman, just like any other one. The way to get over her is to have her and put her aside. There's nothing special about her, not really.

There's nothing special about me, either. What makes me think she'd want me?

He's a man. . .he's a human man. . .he's the man in the hero suit. Tom cat. . .Tomcat. . .Captain. . .Jim. . .

There's no future to thinking like this. He can never know the truth, he can never know he does not know the truth. A relationship built on lies is like a sand-palace against the tide. . .no foundations, no hope.

But I have not felt such deep feelings before. . .so many emotions. Many times the major one has been pity. I would not trade places with him for. . .for the Hyfa Vane itself. The toll his obligations take on him. . .I swear I can see him age. Selfless devotion demands extreme sacrifice. I wonder how often he realizes that one day they will take this tribute to technology away from him and he will be a lonely old man with nothing to show for all his devotion and sacrifice but Command braid and some medals. Assuming he lives to see old age at all.

I have not added to his peaceful existence. "Kirk makes things happen," Caidan told me. So does Caberfae, that is my job. Perhaps it is fortunate that our "partnership" is to be of short duration. . . the galaxy will be the better for it. Still. . .what grand cataclysms we could create, what debacles. . .

His eyes sometime show all the sorrow of the world. I have never in my life seen sadder eyes on any being. . .even when he smiles. . .it is there below the surface. Such a complex combination of traits and inclinations. Tomcat. . .with a sentimental streak a parent would be embarrassed by. A starship captain with a position of utmost responsibility and authority. . .a gamesman who takes the kind of chances no sane man should. A daredevil who is yet the most cautious gambler. A wise man with a wildly boyish nature. A young man growing old and burning out before his time. Few things are sadder than an idealist faced with reality. . .And to have only a Vulcan for a true friend. . .worse than sad. Oh be honest with yourself, woman, or have you forgotten how over the years? Would you feel this way about the Vulcan if he had not made it clear his "feelings" about you? Somehow he senses how out of place you are. I am, true. But where do I belong? How fair is it to think of him as being jealous when in reality. . .

But I have my job, follow orders like a soldier. . .He is one too and I have known many soldiers. But he is different somehow. . .(Tomcat!)

It is bad to daydream. . .must not fall into the habit. Distractions can be deadly. Still there are times when I must catch myself thinking of the fields of flame-grass on Vesta, fired by the brilliant sky, rich violet waves lapping against the coastline. . .so beautiful. . .so lonely. . .Jim. . .Tomcat. . .

Captain, Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*. My commanding officer, at least for the time being. Nothing more. I am agent Alpha 2. Alphas have an estimated capacity for peak function of nine years. I too am growing old and burning out before my time.

Why do I shudder inside when I see him? Why am I grateful for a friendly word, a casual smile? Why do I find myself making cutting remarks when all I want to do is help? Why does it pain me to add one more lie to those I have already told him? Why do I care that the *Enterprise* is the harshest mistress? No, I will not admit it, not even to myself. He is only a man and there have been so many.

Perhaps these feelings are from being around humans too much. Spock is right. They are most illogically emotional and sentimental. Love. . .sex, mating I mean, is for enjoyment. Pleasure not pain. But he is so very alone and so am I.

What was that bit of poetry Christine recited that time? "Promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep." Miles to go. . . must all of them be traveled alone?

*She looks at you so coolly
And her eyes shine like the moon in the sea
She comes in incense and patchouli
So you take her to find what's waiting inside the
Year of the Cat.*

Chantal stood on the other side of the room, next to his bed. He felt embarrassed by the fact that he had a strong desire to simply stand where he was and fill his eyes with her. It seemed strange that the misery he had experienced for so long, all that night, all those long months, had lifted so quickly and completely.

The silence was touched with the tinkling of small bells as she began to remove the blue and silver dancing costume she wore. She had danced for him the betrothal ceremony of her people. He felt his breath catch as he watched her, noting with some amusement that his infatuation had not created a mental picture of her nudity that would pale with reality. Her body almost glowed in the half-light of the cabin, as though her skin were lightly covered with gold. Slender arms moved gracefully as she disrobed, revealing small, firm breasts, almost boyish hips, trimly muscular legs. An athletic form, but soft somehow. Unlike most women he had known, she was totally devoid of body hair. Holding the sole remaining veil to her with one hand, she extended the other to him. Kirk darkened the room.

Her eyes adjusted more quickly than normal to the almost non-existent light level. The trembling that she had experienced during their conversation was gradually replaced by an incredible calm. Under the circumstances it perplexed her somewhat. *There was a time, she thought, when this would have been impossible to even contemplate.* Now only the lack of it was such. She wondered what had crossed his mind while he silently watched her undress. *Men have thought me beautiful, she recalled, but if that is true, then beauty is one of the saddest things in the universe. I want only one to think me so. . . was he pleased or disappointed when he saw me?*

As Kirk stepped closer, the dim light touched lightly on his bared torso. His arms looked strong, evenly muscled, and she was sure that he had lost the weight she had thought unnecessary when she first met him. His chest was broad and pleasingly smooth, unlike the males of her race who were hirsute. As he walked toward her, the veil she was holding drifted to the floor. With a gesture gallant, deferential, and bold, he swept her up in his arms then placed her on the bed, settling himself beside her.

Their eyes met first. Chantal extended a slightly hesitant hand and touched his face lightly. His hand stroked her hair as it surrounded her shoulders in a shimmering cape. He kissed her lightly at first, watching her eyes close. Their lips met again and parted as he felt her body relax in his encircling arms. He wondered at the coolness her body possessed and why it felt so comforting to him. His hands reveled in the satin-touch of her flesh as they moved freely to fondle her, his urgency tempered by the sheer pleasure of wanting to prolong this moment. . . to savour all its nuances. Her nipples hardened under his fingertips, then his lips while his hands moved on. She returned his tactile endearments with an ardour that delighted him. . . not shy, not hesitant. It was as though she knew instinctively what would most please him. He felt her fingers trace intricate patterns on his back as he slid lower, leaving a trail of kisses as he moved. She pressed closer as his tongue met her, acknowledging her womanhood's taste and texture. . . rather like buttered bread, he thought. She gasped, then sighed, somehow moving even closer against him.

Unable to resist, he raised his head to look at her face. . . eyes closed, lips parted, her breathing quickened. He thought that perhaps there really was no power, no ability, that was more basically important than this, to please one's beloved. Her eyes opened and she smiled at him, opening her arms wide. As he moved closer to her, she wrapped her arms around his waist and he felt her soft, moist lips engulf him. Tremors pulsed through his body and he forced himself to regiment his thoughts in order to balance the sudden surges welling within. As his mental barriers eroded, he put his hands to her shoulders and gently pushed her away. She smiled, triumphant, and as they embraced he eased her back against the bed. Chantal extended a hand to guide him, raising herself up as they joined, her legs around his waist. Their bodies moved in harmony, slowly, evenly. . . then faster. Suddenly he heard her cry out, one sharp sudden sound, and felt her muscles clenching and contracting around him. His thrusts increased spasmodically then as she clung to him.

Kirk balanced his weight on his arms, drinking in the look on her face. Her six-fingered hand reached out and tugged at his arm, urging him to relax and so he settled his weight against her carefully.

"You will not hurt me," she insisted finally. "The other position cannot be very comfortable." Her eyes were still closed as she spoke. Then her hands came up around him and cuddled his head against her bosom.

"Chantal. . ."

"Sssshh. . ." Her fingers gently stroked his cheek.

He thought again that he was right. There was no power greater than this.

*When the morning comes and you're still with her
And the bus and the tourists are gone,
And you've thrown away your choice and lost your ticket
So you have to stay on.
But the drumbeat strains of the night remain
In the rhythm of the newborn day
You know some time you're bound to leave her
But for now you remain in the
Year of the Cat.*





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Made for Each Other

Annelaurie
Logan

It was blue and it was shapeless and it was heaving across the deck towards the door and Captain Kirk, who leaped back so quickly that he almost knocked Spock over. I jumped up from my seat in the corner of the rec room and reclaimed my property, scooping the double handful of protoplasm up onto my shoulder, where it lightened to a pale turquoise and sheeted down my right arm and over my back. Now I had a blue cape over my dress, whose neckline writhed and moved down an inch or so to accomodate it.

Kirk gave me a dirty look but the female ensigns at the nearest table were fascinated. They asked me about my "pet's" color range, and whether it was I or the "beast" (actually, it's a form of artificial life whose closest natural analogue is a sort of one-celled plant) that chose the style, and whether it was only someone from my planet who could make it work? So I offered it to them, and they sat turning it from a blob to a cape to a sort of clumsy overskirt, shading it from the palest sky-blue to the deepest navy-black, giggling at each other and enjoying themselves enormously.

It made me feel a little better, too. I was the youngest member of a delegation from Paradox, a planet settled by Terran refugees from religious persecution during the first wave of star-travel which had just been re-discovered by the Federation. We'd been on the *Enterprise* for more than a week now, and my co-delegates--the doctor, the psychologist, the linguist, the xenobiologist, the negotiator, and the mechanical engineer--were busy trying to catch up on four hundred years of scientific "progress". I was the only one with nothing to do; apparently nobody on this starship was used to fourteen-year-old ambassadors, but they didn't remark about the fact that I was the only one without a real job--just the reverse of what a shipful of Paradoxans would have noticed (which was exactly as we'd hoped: that was one of the reasons I'd been chosen). We have been in touch with several other civilizations, including the Organians, but none of them were human or even very humanoid. I was used to being treated as a person; but the Federation crew members didn't seem to know how to talk to me. . .either they avoided me entirely, or they tended to raise their voices and use only simple words. So I was lonely, and I was bored.

Spock stared thoughtfully after a male crewmember who slammed down his glass and deserted the room as soon as he saw what the women were playing with. I didn't say anything, but I happened to recognize him as the man who'd been getting increasingly friendly with our linguist--until the romantic evening with just the two of them alone in her quarters, when he started to remove her dress and it crawled down his arm. He'd run out of the room screaming. Later he'd requested a change in his duty assignment and now he avoided all seven of us. It was rather a disappointment for Lyndry. . .

Kirk told me, "We're about ready to enter orbit around Lukoluh, Miss--um, er, ah, Tara. You might want to inform the leader of your party." (We didn't have a "leader" in the way he used the word--if one person could be responsible for everything, only one person would have been sent--and for some reason this made the Captain uncomfortable. The psychologist said it was because this kind of behavior contradicted his deepest ideas of proper social organization. In any case, he'd taken to routing most of his important messages through me: presumably because he thought I was too young and unimportant to be the "real" leader myself, but would know who to report back to. He also hadn't realized we use the clan name first, because I suspect he meant to be formal with me.)

Spock went over to a synthesizer slot. Kirk continued, "This is a routine reconnaissance--a simpler version of our contact with your planet, Tara. The reading from the scout drone that came past here earlier indicated the sort of large-life-form congregations that might mean a simple sort of civilization, or might just mean animals running in flocks. Anyway, they say they weren't the kind of energy expenditures that sophisticated technologies use, so we shouldn't have to spend more than a day or two exploring and collecting information. It won't really hold up your journey to Starbase Nineteen, certainly."

Then a woman on the other side of the room screamed.

There was a huge, heavily-furred black cat with a fine ruff around its shoulders crouching by the synthesizer. It looked confused to me. One of the men near it pulled his phaser, and I yelled "NO!" and ran to block the cat before anyone could do something that would be regretted later. Nobody else seemed to notice the remnants of a Starfleet uniform tangled around the cat's feet. I tried to untangle it without being obvious; very few of the *Enterprise* personnel wear thermal suitliners on board the ship. They'd be uncomfortably warm for someone born of Earth.

"Animals aren't allowed in the rec rooms, Tara," Kirk said sternly. "You'll have to take him back to



your room. Now."

"*Sickbay!*" I hissed at the cat, tugging at his ruff and hoping that he'd understand. "Yes, Captain, right away, I'm sorry if you were bothered, please excuse us." The big feline let me lead him towards the exit. I snatched my "cape" back from the women as we hurried past; one of them said, "Gee, I didn't know you'd brought any *real* pets! He's sort of cute; what's his name?"

"Syerii," I muttered, avoiding her eyes, as we slipped into the corridor and to the nearest elevator.

Dr. McCoy looked up from his electronscope as we entered Sickbay. "I'm a doctor, not a veterinarian, Tara honey," he said automatically. "What's the matter with the big fella? Didn't think you Paradoxans had any animals that size with you anyway. How'd you sneak him aboard?"

"That looks a lot like a Vulcan crag cat, but it's the wrong color." Christine Chapel remarked as she came out of the labroom.

"Well, I have reason to believe he's Vulcan," I said cautiously, "but. . .well. . .maybe it's something to do with Lukoluh's sun? Anyway, I'm sure it won't be hard for you," (I addressed the cat) "to change back if you concentrate on it. I hadn't heard, you know, that your people. . .ahhh. . .aren't there any legends on Vulcan?"

McCoy, at this point, made the mistake of trying to pat "my pet", who laid his ears flat against his skull and gave him a look which would have deterred anyone less self-involved. The doctor grabbed one tasselled ear, and the cat let out a yowl and slapped at him with a six-toed, razor-clawed front paw. McCoy jumped back rapidly, as blood started to well from five shallow gashes across his chest and through his ruined shirt. He glared at me as I hastily dumped the beastume across the cat. Then he gasped--for the cat shifted and disappeared. Mr. Spock was sitting on the floor where it had been, dressed in a blue tunic, shaking a few drops of blood off his fingertips fastidiously.

Nurse Chapel broke this tense tableau by falling down in a dead faint.

Spock had changed back into uniform. "There is," he said carefully, "an ancient tradition on my home-world that certain families were once able to change into the animal totems of the clan. Of course, such

legends are preserved solely as a historic curiosity. I do not even know what my family's totem may have been, for we had abandoned such primitive customs long before the first Terrans left their caves."

"In a way, it makes sense that Vulcans might turn into cats," McCoy added. "They're descended from cats anyway. What doesn't make sense is the Earth story about people changing into wolves under a full moon. There are no canines that I've ever heard about among *our* ancestors."

"Well, *werewolves*," I told him, "We have a few genuine werewolves even on Paradox." (And so we do.) We call them *wolves*, with a *u*, to keep them distinct from the others. The Organians used to study them and they claim the mutation could probably be expected in any Terran-humanoid stock. They said that lycanthropy was the result of unusual cosmic stress, like the gravitational pull of a particularly large satellite or planetary twin, or the radiation thrown off by a star shifting states, on an individual carrying a combination of several different rare recessive genes. It's not very often that those particular chromosomal twists show up, and it's even less common for one person to inherit all of them, and even someone who did have the potential to shapeshift might never run into such large-scale events as a solar storm or a planetary gravity shift. So werewolves wouldn't be very common. On the other hand, it *is* the sort of thing that people would remember and talk about for quite a while, so that you'd get legends and stories about them even if the trait disappeared for several generations. And, of course, every so often there would be another werewolf to give the stories flavor."

Spock nodded. Perhaps hearing a good sound scientific explanation made him feel a little less embarrassed about his own departure from the usual. "It would seem that the Organians would logically attempt to discover the planet where the lycanthropic variant originated."

"May be that they did," I told him. "In the first place, my ancestors didn't exactly leave Earth of their own free will, and we were never too eager to re-establish contact with them--with you. In the second place, we don't pretend to understand the Organians. Probably human beings *can* imagine only a very small part of what the Organians are. We've never had or caused any trouble with them, and they've taught us--some interesting things. We don't even know why the Organians keep in contact with Paradox; we think it's just that they're, well, 'collectors' of various kinds of natural curiosities, although if they have any interest in travelling outside of their own narrow slice of space they don't do it in any way that we can follow and they don't give us any information about it afterwards. Not, as I said, that we would ask. It might not be polite, and anyway it's not the sort of science we're interested in, much."

I was afraid that we were getting too close to areas I wasn't supposed to talk about with the starship people; fortunately Spock didn't get a chance to ask me what kind of science Paradoxians *are* interested in, because Captain Kirk came into the medical office just then. He sort of frowned at me, but either he didn't want to risk offending us by sending me away or he wasn't feeling very secretive about his information. "We seem to be orbiting a ghost planet. The contact team found a whole series of villages, the sort of towns a race of humanoids would build, but not one single native. The beds have been slept in, there's food in the kitchens, toys in the bedrooms and carts in the streets, but the only large mammals they could spot with the tricorders were packs of big shaggy carnivores."

McCoy said, "I thought the scout drone claimed that there couldn't be much of a civilization on Lukoluh."

Kirk dismissed the scout with a shrug. "*Scientists*. Ask three of them what color an orange is, and you'll get three different answers, none of them the one you want. They tried to tell me this is a rare and peculiar sort of culture that doesn't use as much energy as it should, or something like that. I just want to know where the Lukolans went, and *that* they can't tell me."

"Perhaps the Lukolans are the large carnivores."

McCoy guffawed. "Spock, I didn't think that Vulcans were allowed to make jokes."

"Vulcans do not 'joke', Doctor. It is merely a hypothesis. A race far more technologically sophisticated than yours has certified the existence of a variant within the human race that can transform themselves into the semblance of wolves--large carnivores. We have established that, just possibly, this star may provide the stress necessary for the release of the phenotype. At least, it seems to have this effect on," (he almost shuddered) "a human-Vulcan hybrid. And the Lukolans could not have physically deserted the planet within the last few days without the exodus registering on the instruments of the *Enterprise*. Since the landing party has established that the only large mammals on the planet are the groups of carnivores, and since the sentients responsible for the cultural artifacts could not have abandoned the planet, either the carnivores are the sentients or we must accept the existence of an otherwise unknown method of non-physical, large-scale interplanetary travel."

"*Werewolves*?" Kirk was understandably confused. "There's no such thing! What are you talking about?"

None of us could meet his eyes. We all seemed to feel a little delicate about broaching such a sensitive subject around Mr. Spock. Fortunately, Nurse Chapel, who'd been holding the fort in sickbay while McCoy bandaged the gashes on his chest and complained loudly and inaccurately about "Vulcan germs", chose

that moment to interrupt us.

"Doctor, there's a case--a patient--someone I think you'd better examine personally." She stared at the Vulcan, blushed, and tried to step back out of the private office. However, the doorway was being blocked by a crewman in a red shirt and she stumbled into him.

There was no chance that he'd be knocked over. He was a big man, taller even than Spock, and so wide you wouldn't realize how tall he was until you stood next to him and found yourself staring his navel in the eye. He steadied Chapel with a single huge hand, looking very much as though he'd have liked to hide behind her (were that even remotely possible). He too was blushing, almost as fierce a red as his shirt or his carrotty hair.

Chapel had recovered herself, in several senses. "This, Doctor McCoy, is Ensign Norton. Norton was assigned to escort Lieutenant Rush to sickbay because she had 'an accident' when the ship warped into orbit."

McCoy sighed and brushed the two of them out of the way. "What seems to be the problem, Lt. Rush?" he asked the woman on the examination table. She didn't look ill, or even disturbed; just sort of resentful. She sat up and shook her bangs out of her eyes. She also was fairly tall--though not in Norton's league--copper-skinned with high, flat cheekbones and strange silver streaks and highlights in her short dark hair. I was pleased to discover that I remembered the old racial classification for her ancestors: Amerindians, they were called. I wondered if the unusual coloring of her hair was natural.

"It is foolish," she said. "This is not a medical problem at all. It's just a . . .condition. . .I've been coping with all my life."

It's difficult for someone as huge as Ensign Norton to sound plaintive, but he managed. "We were on duty in the engine room. We'd just warped into orbit when Lieutenant Rush. . .*changed*. Into a *wolf*."

Rush snapped, "This is a family condition. I don't know why I changed so suddenly down in the engine room--I didn't intend to--but I switched back as soon as I realized what had happened. If I hadn't been *seen*," (she glared at poor Norton, who luckily was giving the floor his rapt and embarrassed attention) "I would have gone right on with my work. As I will do now, with your permission, Doctor, Captain."

Kirk, Spock, and I had followed McCoy into sickbay. Kirk was staring at Rush with his eyes bugged out. "A *werewolf*?" he said at last. "I don't believe this! There *are* no such animals!"

Rush gave him one glance totally unsuitable for one addressing a superior officer. Then she began to shudder, her flesh melting and shifting. I noticed she had enough past experience that her uniform was transformed with her flesh; she knew very well how to handle her powers. She was a dainty, feminine wulf and the silver cast to her fur was fascinating. I looked at Norton; he was watching Rush with an expression of such intense adoration that *I* almost blushed.

When she was satisfied that all present had been convinced of the reality of lycanthropy, Rush shifted back swiftly and stood up in a single clean, fluid motion. "If I may return to my station, sir--"

McCoy mused, "Well, Spock, I admit that--*if* the Lukolans are werewolves, it might explain why they hadn't been heard from in a while. I can see where they might not want to explain things to the people back home, given that wolf-men never got what might be called a favorable press."

"Actually, it might really have been an accident," I demurred. "Back then, sub-space was a new and tricky way to communicate, and only the Central Empire had any kind of warp-engines. On Paradox some of the machinery broke down after the first generation died off, and we'd forgotten how to fix things if we ever knew. We just had to make out--as best we could. That was before we knew that there were other civilizations on nearby planets."

Captain Kirk could not realistically be called an imaginative man, but he is very adaptable. And he is supremely practical, not in the sense which most Terrans seem to use the word (as though it meant, "I insist on reducing all possible problems to a single set of solutions") but in the admirable way he uses the materials at hand to solve the questions of the moment. "I'd been thinking of netting a couple of the big carnivores. . .but I guess not, if you say they're intelligent, that they're the colonists. Maybe. . .if they're from Earth. . .do werewolves? . . ."

"Assuming a common method of communication, Lt. Rush," Spock broke in smoothly, "The Captain would like to know if you might be willing to volunteer for a special landing party."

Several of us started explaining the situation to her. It didn't take very long, even allowing for contention, confusion, and a certain amount of repetition. Finally Rush said thoughtfully, "I have never met a--what do you call us, Tara?--*wulf* I was not related to. My parents learned, painfully, that our talents were best kept hidden from outsiders. It would be very. . .pleasant. . .to see what sort of world our kind can build. I will go, and gladly, Captain Kirk."

"Me too! Me too, please!" The others looked at me speculatively. "Remember, Captain, I have had some dealings with wulves myself, on Paradox. And," I added in deference to Terran prejudices, "I am sure that I can get--permission from the others of the delegation."

Kirk snorted. "All right--but I have to see your director first."

Ensign Norton, thus encouraged, gathered up his courage in his two hands and managed to gasp, "Ca-- Captain? Sir? Could I--can I volunteer for the mission, sir?"

The Captain seemed to notice him for the first time. He examined him carefully and grinned, "Far be it from me to interfere with the course of true love. The landing party," he addressed Spock, "will consist of myself, you, Bones, Lt. Rush, Norton, and Miss Tara. . .with the proper permission."

I hadn't thought it was humanly possible for Ensign Norton to blush any deeper, but he managed.

We beamed down inside the city proper, but the first thing one noticed about the planet of Lukoluh was the smell of growing green. It was late afternoon. The road we stood in was a single lane of gravelled pavement across a carefully tended greensward. The buildings were all one- and two-story, stepped and jumbled like giant toys, built with lots of ramps and patios and full-wall screens and windows opened wide. Rush dropped to her knees and shapeshifted in one economical motion; delighted to be away from recycled air and the smell of machinery, she threw back her head and howled. . .and was answered briefly by several other wolves, not too far away by the sound of them. She gave the rest of us a rather apologetic look and moved towards the sector where the other howls had sounded, breaking into a trot as she got further from the party and closer to the unseen colonists.

Spock, I think, really wanted very strongly to change and drop and run with her--surprising for a Vulcan but not, I guess, for a shapeshifter however inexperienced or unwilling. His whole body leaned out towards the outskirts of the city and the strange four-footed intelligences hidden in the shadows of the buildings: but a lifetime of keeping his feelings secret even from himself checked him before his crewmates even noticed the lapse. I would have spared him more thought--and frankly, more sympathy--if I hadn't been trying to back away from the little group without being noticed. One cautious step at a time, I moved around the corner of a convenient outbuilding, sat down in the soft grass, and started to think myself into wolf-form.

For I am a trained biogeneticist, and rather a good one, or I would not have been chosen for the delegation to Star Base Nineteen. One of the most useful things the Organians have taught us is the ability, given the right combination of talents and training, to change our limited human forms for others sometimes more suited to exploration, and the efficient use of the strange senses of these new bodies. Not everyone can be trained this way, and questions of mass and mind limit one's choices, but I have been a "dolphin" leaping through silver-green sun-scented seas on a water-world where my fellow Paradoxans built cities on the islands of ancient matted weed which sometimes clumped six miles long and three miles deep; and a dun-colored "pony" marking through the long grasses of a prairie planet; and even a sort of griffinish winged beast on a world of pinnacles and mountain peaks scoured by the continual updrafts of a shifting, howling, strong wind; as well as the more traditional imitation-wulf. (The griffin was the most difficult. Without the genetic and biochemical patterns of an actual beast to copy, it's incredibly hard to shapeshift properly. My specialized ability to "be" an animal that had never existed outside of my imagination had earned me the right to accompany the Federation delegation--that, and my age and size and sex.)

Shifting to a wulf is *not* difficult. Very soon I was a tawny wulfling, loping after the lady called Starshower for the frost-tones in her fur. Most of my brain and all of my body was simply thrilling to the powers and pleasures of my new disguise. This was a slightly chillier climate than the artificially even temperatures of the *Enterprise*, and the breeze as well as the faint dampness of the earth held scents well. There was soft dirt and grass growing slowly under my pads as I held my head low and ran flat out across the outskirts of the Lukolan city till I was pacing even with Lieutenant Rush--Starshower. She radiated pure sensual enjoyment in great waves as she leaped to a low wall curving out from one of the buildings and howled again. I followed her example in my own puppy-tones, ending with a query. From the woods just beyond the city another wulf answered us, and we swerved forward and right to meet him.

There were three of them waiting in the shadows, just outside of the landing party's range of vision or tricorder. The big aging male who'd first answered us (Staghorn, we learned afterwards), a mature female with chestnut back and honey-blond belly and paws (Beegold, they called her), and a young male with a streak of white down the left side of his face and across one dark eye (Blaize).

Starshower and I stopped at a respectful distance and crouched submissively, as was proper for two strangers confronting the obvious leaders of the local wulf community. The five of us talked then, not with words but in a wonderful complex of sounds and smells and postures and gestures: very lovely it was for me, after weeks of using only the over-simplified tongue-speeches most of the Federation crewpersons insisted on.

I had guessed almost right about the beginnings of the "Lukolans". One of the families among the first human colonists had possessed the genetic werefactors: when their companions got past the shock of seeing

man become four-foot the clan was driven away from the shattered ship and the struggling colony, sent out into the wilderness to survive or die. But, unguessably, the first children born under this new orange sun started to experiment with lycanthropy themselves, and within four generations only shapeshifters were born in the city or out of it. The first Family came back out of hiding, and the new race settled into finding ways to live with the talents their forebearers had never prepared for. Lukoluh had been good to them. Laboratory mice and rabbits from the ship had escaped and multiplied enormously on this world which had never known life more complicated than that of large insects, and the wolves kept the rodents from increasing past the capacity of the environment to feed them all. The cultivated plants from Earth seemed to have mutated with the people, and provided the dietary changes necessary to born omnivores. The werewolf spread out little by little from the first site, developing a culture to fit their needs as they gradually covered the planet.

"What does your planet want of us after all these centuries?" Staghorn asked us finally. "We have nothing to sell you that would be worth the cost of shipping, and we could not buy what you might want to sell us."

"Our ancestors chose this planet to be well off the trade routes. And I doubt that we could be said to constitute a military threat. . ." Blaize added.

"Forgive us," Beegold finished, "but we have every reason to mistrust the talking apes, as I'm sure you two must know. They can't conquer us, at any rate," she said bitterly, "for their children or their children's children would be wolves--like us."

Starshower tried to explain the power of the Federation, and the increased toleration wrought in the past three hundred years by human contact with sentient races far more alien than mere werewolves could be. She stressed that this was, for us, only one rather insignificant stop on a sweep through this sector of the galaxy. She pointed out that Star Fleet was most sternly enjoined to peace and to non-interference. She also, somewhat shamefacedly, told them that Lukoluh (like Paradox, and all the other planets they had investigated or were due to investigate later on this mission) was close to the edge of the Klingon-Federation demilitarized zone. . .

Something neither wulf nor human rustled in the undergrowth near us. I bounced away from the parley to intercept it, and found my teeth locked in the ear of a huge black feline--Mr. Spock.

Several strenuous minutes later, the two of us had retreated far away enough from the others to talk with some privacy as we changed back to humanoid form. "It's not polite to eavesdrop on personal conversations," I said with as much dignity as I could muster, "particularly since I don't think you could have understood us."

Spock pointed out, quite truthfully I'm afraid, that I could not have known some of the things I'd been talking about earlier if I had not taken advantage of my youth and apparent insignificance to do a bit of eavesdropping on my own aboard the *Enterprise*. (Vulcans seem to be much harder to fool than mere Terrans.) He said that the humans in the landing party seemed to be somewhat unnerved by the long twilight as the growing darkness sauntered towards the city from the west, opposite the setting sun. The shadows of the





jumbled buildings grew longer, and small packs and bunches of wulves flashed past at the edge of the humans' visibility. Every third wulf seemed to have the distinctive silver-tints-on-raven of Lieutenant Rush's fur. And, of course, they did not know where or how or why I had disappeared; Captain Kirk, for one, assumed the worst--that I had become frightened, blundered away and into one of the packs, and been kidnapped or killed. He was snapping at Norton and the doctor. McCoy had for some reason become convinced that his tricorder was malfunctioning, and was starting to take it apart as Spock had shapeshifted and slipped away.

"McCoy? He's a doctor, not a mechanic. He can barely change his *mind* without calling in an engineer."

"Humans," Spock said coldly, "are seldom noteworthy for the logic of their behavior. In any event, it seemed the most rational alternative on my part to--ah--assume an alternate form--and attempt to make contact with the Lieutenant, the natives, or you." (I decided that it would be counter-productive to query the Vulcan about his own desire to test his new reflexes.) "If the others. . . your companions. . . have concluded their conference, it might be best to re-approach them. We cannot wait here all night."

It was getting colder as the darkness deepened. I'd spent nights out and unprotected in much worse weather, but the Federation members would hardly hang around much longer--I was a little impressed that they had waited even this long; spaceshippers have notoriously little patience for Climate. I compromised by offering to go back to the landing party with Spock and assure them that I (and Rush/Starshower) were still alive, healthy, and free. We could all go back to the *Enterprise* and wait in comfort; in the morning, when we beamed down again, the community representatives and our errant lieutenant would undoubtedly be waiting for us.

Spock had been concentrating intently, listening for something other than my conversation; suddenly he started to slide back into cat-shape. "The wolves you were with have moved out of range. As you no doubt knew that they would. It would be illogical to attempt tracking them in the darkness, since they know the territory and we--I--do not." Finished, he started to trot confidently back towards the city. I thought myself into a "wulf" again and followed him. I didn't blame him for being angry with me; after all, I *had* more or less lied about certain things; but I hadn't known that the others would sneak off on us like that. Besides, Vulcans are supposed to eschew all forms of emotionalism. . . he hadn't even waited to hear my side of the issue.

We both stopped and shifted again just before we could be seen by the contact team. Kirk lectured me when I meandered back into the circle behind Spock--lectured *at* me, as though I was not an adult or an equal but just a silly child who'd made trouble for my superiors by wandering off without thinking. On Paradox, I would have challenged him to a song-duel. Or, in my status as an "alien" ambassador, I think I could have registered a complaint and gotten Kirk reprimanded by *his* superiors. But I had my own reasons for wanting to be back aboard the ship and not put under restraints, so I just nodded and apologized and was properly vague about my activities. (Spock, as I had suspected, wouldn't draw attention to his own peculiar talents by mentioning mine.) When the Captain wound down from snarling to merely orating, I knelt to help Dr. McCoy pick up the pieces of his scattered equipment (the smaller tools are designed to be taken apart and jury-rigged under primitive conditions, which unfortunately encourages some people to experiment past their mechanical capabilities) and our leader snapped out the command to transport us aboard.

It wasn't hard to find the others of my delegation--those who weren't sleeping the sleep of absolute physical exhaustion were still at their laboratory setups--but it was at least an hour, maybe two, before they could all be awoken, torn away from various researches and experiments, and assembled in the sleeping quarters shared by the men of the delegation. This was the smallest room assigned to us, and we'd taken a calculated risk in locating and deactivating the various bugs, spyeyes, and recording devices concealed there. It was the only place I trusted for talking about the plight of the Lukolans, although the linguist had assured us that the Federation would have quite a lot of trouble translating the mixture of alien tongues and finger-speech we used for convenience between us. After the first three minutes, even the grouchiest of my fellows agreed that I had been right to call for a conference. Something might very soon be needed to keep the Federation and the Klingon Empire from "protecting" this planet into extinction between them; and we are not individualists, on Paradox, we prefer to solicit as many opinions as possible on *any* decision.

Not being much of a military power in our own right, and without the experience to know which among the numerous allies and antagonists of the Starfleet could be trusted with such responsibility, there seemed to be only one immediately possible solution, however.

". . . *if* the Organians can be interested in this new racial oddity," Pride (the psychologist) concluded.

Nerexa, the xenobiologist, pointed out that this was just the sort of "whimsy" we knew the Organians to encourage among us Lesser Races. (Admittedly we are superstitious about our powerful neighbors. We have many, many reason to respect them--and they are not always benevolent.)

"Given what I only recently discovered about the interactions between the Federation, the Empire, and the Organians," Lyndry (the linguist) said, "I think that we can almost guarantee that Lukoluh will be adequately protected." She told us, briefly, about the strange and inconclusive conflict on what had been thought of as the "unimportant little planet" of Organia, with most disastrous results for such militarized

tribes as our hosts and their Empire opposites. This was very cheering for the rest, although it made me wish that I had not spoken of the Organians quite so freely to the crewmembers here. It was agreed that we would contact our "acquaintances" discreetly, bypassing as best we could the attentions of those who planted the listening devices in our quarters, and let them do what they deemed necessary for the protection of the planet below us.

"And the poor beasts certainly have *my* sympathies!" the engineer muttered.

But there was one more step I had to take, first. I went to search out Norton; fortunately, instead of doing the rational thing and going to bed, he was nursing a cup of stimulant tea in another rec room. It was easy enough to get him talking about our "adventures", and incidentally about his feelings for Lt. Rush.

"Yes, to answer your question, I *do* love her. Not that I could ever tell her that, because she's my superior officer, and she has all kinds of higher-ranking men who'd do anything to help her, and anyway I don't expect she'll ever come back to the ship again, now." Obviously the need to talk had been weighing upon him; he sighed. "She'll stay here, with her own people. And I wish I could be a werewolf. . . then they'd probably let me stay here too, and I could be around here even if she never looks at me again. If I could only *see* her sometimes. . . from afar. . ."

He was wrapping himself up in bad cliches because he was afraid of his own words. These Terrans are very strange. Rather guiltily, I steered the conversation towards my own particular goal. Somehow, unburdening himself to me had convinced the ensign that I was trustworthy, and it didn't take long to persuade him to replace the guard in the transporter room when that unsuspecting individual went off shift. I'd timed the whole procedure well--we managed to get down there and take over just before the *real* replacement was due. The man who'd been watching all shift was more interested in getting some food and some sleep than in asking himself why one of the outworld ambassadors was hanging around this area of the ship at this time of "day". I slipped into the room behind Norton, stood on one of the shiny platforms, and was beamed back down to Lukoluh.

Wolf-shaped again, it took me a surprisingly short time to find Starshower and her companions. They were not unnaturally somewhat insecure about being caught between the wars of two star-travelling cultures far more technologically sophisticated than they. Even the late Lieutenant Rush, who simultaneously had the most knowledge about the Federation and the Empire and the largest investment in those principalities, knew just how little the doctrine of non-interference could mean to a starship captain far away from the "home" planets and with a considerable reputation to protect.

I told them about how we upon Paradox had come to deal with the Organians. As it turned out, Rush was a veteran of the *Enterprise's* short sojourn to that "insignificant" planet, and while that gave her little reason to love the Organians it had certainly shown her that they were worthy of respect. After much wrangling and the addition of about twenty different wolves to our group, one or two at a time, with others occasionally leaving to carry messages and spread the story, it was tentatively agreed that until some better solution offered itself the natives of Lukoluh could do worse than to throw themselves upon the inexplicable mercies of the energy-beings. I (my delegation) was given permission to contact our mutual "neighbors", and to relay messages between Lukoluh and Organia if necessary.

All of this took a while, and by the time we'd gotten everything possible cleared up and straightened away the stars were winking out and the dark sky had the particular luminosity and the hush that comes just before dawn. All but a half-dozen of the Lukolans had slipped away and gone to their usual early-morning routines; the rest of us, slightly stumble-footed from lack of sleep, started back to the site where the landing party would shortly return.

On the way I managed to edge Starshower away from the others a bit. Being too tired to rely on anything more subtle, I asked, "Do you know that Ensign Norton is in love with you?"

She stopped short and snarled at me. "Could he marry a monster? This morning he'll be laughing with his friends about his narrow escape." She clicked her white teeth shut and managed enough of a gallop to get away from me.

So she loved him, too. I think it would save a great deal of time and effort if these Terrans would do what they wanted, instead of what they think others will expect of them.

The first proper diplomatic conference between the Federation and the colonial inhabitants of the planet Lukoluh (with minor assistance from the envoys of Paradox) was as boring as only a diplomatic meeting can be. As the preliminary politenesses were established and the debates grew warmer and louder, I noticed Ensign Norton was among us. He must have somehow talked himself out of the consequences of his dereliction --truly love maketh a man capable of mighty deeds--assisted no doubt by the fact that his commanding officer had no way of knowing *why* he'd needed to be alone in the transporter room: Kirk hadn't noticed me among the other wolves when he first landed and it rapidly got too confused to follow the progress of one individual along the sidelines. Norton had cornered Rush and was obviously trying to convince her of something.

He didn't look like a man who thought he had much chance of succeeding. But only a short time later, he put a huge hand on my shoulder and dragged me into a (relatively) quiet corner.

"I know about what you Paradoxans can do," he said without preamble. "I know that you can turn yourselves into different animals, I saw people doing it when we stopped at your planet. Can you teach me how?"

I was shocked. We'd thought that none of the Federation members had noticed anything before it was decided that the wisest course to take with our intergalactic kinsmen would be a discreet silence about our "talents". You wouldn't think that such a big man as Norton could disappear in a crowd. "Quiet!" I hissed at him, edging away from the other ambassadors. "How did you--you *mustn't*--who *told* you--!"

"Never mind how it happened. Can you show me how I can do it, too?" He looked over my shoulder; I turned and saw a silver-and-ebony wulf waiting between us and the edge of the woods. Starshower. She stared back at me.

Norton was still whispering. "Look at it this way--if you help me get away, then I can't tell anyone what I know about *you*. Can you help me?"

"How many people have you talked to already?" I was calculating what might be accomplished in these enormously unfavorable circumstances. Apart from wanting to conceal our peculiar abilities as long as possible, I was amazed at the change in Norton--he actually looked alive and enthusiastic. If this was what he wanted. . . *First and most important*, runs the proverb, *is the heart's desire*. If I could show him. . . *if* he could follow my explanations. . .

"NO ONE. I swear to you. Please!" he said.

I swept the leaves and debris from a patch of flat pavement, keeping a wary eye on the crowd of debaters just a few yards away. With a handful of loose soil crumbled fine, I dribbled out the first genetic diagram that Norton would need to memorise.

I have no experience as a teacher, and my pupil knew nothing about the background to my instructions. Nor were my tools the finest ever designed. I was afraid that someone would wander over to see what we were doing with such absorption. I was afraid that Norton wouldn't understand and would give me away out of anger and frustration. Norton, I suspect, was simply terrified of failing. We seemed to have been crouched over my crude "blackboard" for hours, as I drew and re-drew patterns, and had Norton draw them over again, with all the precision we could muster.

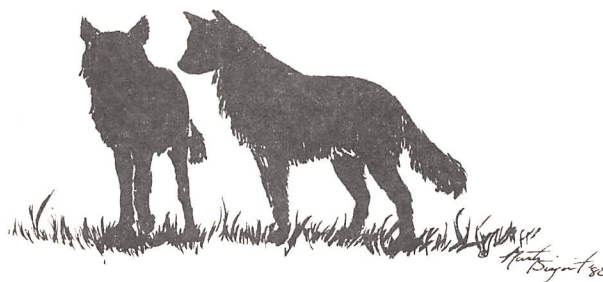
Suddenly the Federation crewman in the red shirt disappeared. There was a monstrous redblond male wulf with dark eyes opposite me. I sighed and stood up, my joints creaking in protest. He shook his ruff and stared at his massive front paws, looked up (but not very *far* up) at me, baring his impressive fangs in an open-mouthed doggish grin. I signaled him to be silent. He settled for wagging his tail, vibrating all over in delight, and putting his front paws on my shoulders as he gently closed his jaws around my throat. A very wolfish gesture; he'd manage his new life well.

The silver-washed female wulf sent out a single soundless call. He dropped and turned to run, with a last look at me and his old human companions.

"Go, Sunfire," I whispered. "Run to your lady, Sunfire!"

She gamboled forward and leaped across his broad shoulders playfully. They touched noses and sped off into the forest and away from their former lives.

It was quite some time before Kirk realized that he'd lost another crewmember.



Wide

Open Spaces

Vicky

Edgerton

"Y'know, Jim, I still don't see any practical reason for this particular mission," McCoy grumbled to Kirk. They stepped onto the bridge of the *Enterprise*, the turbolift doors whooshing shut behind them. Both glanced immediately at the forward viewscreen, which as yet showed nothing out of the ordinary. Spock, seated in the command chair, overheard the remark. He stood, and Kirk sank into his accustomed seat. McCoy leaned casually against the command chair, eyeing the Vulcan, who gazed impassively down at the doctor and spoke.

"As was stated in our orders," he pontificated, "the reason for this assignment is the testing of the new navigational systems designed by the Medusans, to determine their effectiveness in use through and beyond the galactic barrier. In addition, we will be gathering as much new data as possible on the barrier itself, once re-entry has been accomplished."

McCoy was not impressed. "I'm not impressed," he said. "I've heard the orders, too. I just don't see why all this is so blasted important. I mean," he added hastily, seeing Spock's affronted reaction and hurrying to stave off the impending scientific rebuttal, "we can't really use any information we might gain flittin' around out there. Not effectively, anyway. Intergalactic travel isn't feasible, what with all the time that'd take, and travel within the galaxy is faster if you stay within the galaxy. Not to mention safer and easier on the ship and the crew." Those members of the bridge crew within earshot, eavesdropping unabashedly on the verbal confrontation, were nodding in agreement. "If all that's so, there ain't no reason to go gallivantin' all over intergalactic space! Right?"

"Several other starships have unintentionally run into the barrier and suffered considerable damage, and had trouble getting back," Kirk pointed out. "A little information might have been useful to them."

Spock went on. "We ourselves have made contact with the barrier, and on occasion gone through it--"

"Disasterously," McCoy cut in, but Spock ignored him.

"--and returned, in the course of routine missions." McCoy's look of frank incredulity at Spock's use of the term "routine" in describing the situations in question also went unnoticed by the science officer. "The system is designed to withstand considerable shock and pressure, and should prove to be more efficient than our current standard-issue equipment. It requires testing. If effective, it will simplify navigation back into our galaxy, eliminating the problems arising in incidents of accidental breakthrough."

"Star Fleet's eternal guinea pigs, that's us," McCoy growled in disgust. "Why not get smart and jes' learn to avoid the damned thing?"

Spock explained patiently. "There is the scientific question to consider also, Doctor. The galactic energy barrier is an anomaly. There is no known natural explanation for it. In fact,"--here his tone became faintly puzzled--"according to current scientific theory, it shouldn't exist at all." He caught McCoy's expression, seemed to give himself a mental shake, and continued, more stiffly than before. "An investigation of the true nature of this phenomenon is invaluable to science and to technology."

"Curiosity killed the cat--just remember that," McCoy added ominously.

Spock was about to point out that the doctor was mixing his metaphors again, but Kirk, looking bemused at the intellectual impasse, broke up the debate. "Gentlemen, all pros and cons aside, we have our orders--"

"Our duty, right or wrong," intoned McCoy solemnly.

Kirk shot him a dirty look. "--and they will be carried out." With an air of finality, he turned his back on the debating society of two, and turned his attention to the main viewscreen. McCoy shrugged and grinned wryly at Spock, who inclined his head slightly and sauntered back to his post. McCoy turned and strolled over to the turbolift. He was still shaking his head and muttering to himself as the doors closed behind him.

All of them were edgy. The *Enterprise*'s previous encounters with the galactic barrier had in fact been anything but routine. They had occurred under difficult circumstances, and had been frightening

experiences for everyone aboard the starship--had in fact proved fatal to some, nearly so to many others. No one, not even the intellectually curious Mr. Spock, was overeager for another such encounter.

But orders were orders. . . .

The galactic barrier soon became visible on the viewscreen, looking small and distant, but growing swiftly to fill the entire screen with its peculiar flickering waves of multicolored light as they hurried towards it. It was like flying into a terran aurora borealis gone wild. A *dangerous* aurora borealis, thought Kirk.

The captain was watching it intently, almost mesmerized by the hypnotic light patterns before him. "What's our ETA, Mr. Chekov?" he asked, wrenching his eyes away from the display.

"We reach the rim in. . . . two minutes, sir," came Chekov's reply, as he threw a quick glance at his computer readout. He and Lieutenant Sulu were already busily engaged in setting the various controls that would activate the newly-installed Medusan navigational equipment and tie it into the ship's main computer.

"Lieutenant Uhura, sound red alert. All crewmembers prepare for breakthrough in one minute." Uhura was already carrying out his order before he'd finished speaking.

The klaxon started blaring in time to the flashing "red alert" lights, as everyone braced themselves for the upcoming contact. The ship shuddered, pitching and yawing violently for what seemed like an eternity, tossing crewmembers within around like leaves in a storm as the engines struggled to break free of the barrier's resistance.

As suddenly as it had begun, the violent shaking ended. The *Enterprise* broke free and catapulted through the silent void of intergalactic space. Bridge personnel began picking themselves up from whatever they'd fallen onto, most of them grumbling vociferously about the lack of seatbelts on the ship, and status reports began flying back and forth over the intercom systems throughout the ship. Chekov and Sulu were already in action, monitoring the navigation systems and the ship's computer read-outs. Preparations for the return trip were beginning.

Aryl, nodding off somnolently in his usual position on the higher plane, started in surprise at the sudden flurry of motion below. "Oh, shit!" he exclaimed in annoyance.

The voice of Tyll nearby drifted lazily over to him from that worthy being's resting place. "I see your pets have broken out again." Amusement rolled in waves through the void.

"Yes," sighed Aryl. "Again. Damned if I know why they keep doing this. There's no reason for it that I can see."

Tyll laughed now. "What, would you expect them to show their reasons and plans to you?"

"Assuming they have any, don't you mean?" replied Aryl, his attention still fixed on the tiny flash of silver below them. "You assume a great deal, considering all the evidence to the contrary." He was upset, and getting more so as he watched. "Oh, there's no purpose to these actions. Perhaps the stellar void holds some compelling attraction for them--at least until they get there. Half the time they just turn around and rush right back in. Leaving me a damaged restraint."

"The stars are always brighter on the other edge of the void'," murmured Tyll.

"Maybe so, but you'd think they'd have figured out that they're not that much brighter by now, wouldn't you? I'm getting tired of constantly keeping an eye on them, rounding them up when they stray out, and repairing the restraint."

Tyll peered more closely. "You know, I think I've seen that one break out before. . . ."

Aryl managed to control his irritation enough to make a closer inspection of the subject of the discussion. "You're right--that one's gotten through several times. There's one in every bunch!"

"Well, you'd better go take care of them. They're not supposed to be running around loose, you know."

"I know, I know--I've read the ordinances!" Aryl exasperated voice reverberated against Tyll. "I'm going now to get the little monster--look there, what did I tell you? Turning around and running right back in already! Another broken restraint, and for nothing. More flynging work for me! I'm about ready to give up. I don't believe they're worth all this trouble!"

Tyll was still watching. "What a waste of energy. I wonder why they bother at all," she mused.

"I told you--to cause trouble," was Aryl's irritated reply.

Tyll became more serious. "You know, they don't seem to respect that restraint any longer. Could be it's time you considered another, more effective type of fencing--this one doesn't faze your little charges in the least. Of course, they're harmless now, and you watch them pretty closely, but they could become real pests before long, and the Council's tightening up the rules about them."

"I said I know that, already!"

"Yes, well, there are several new types of restraints available now. I've seen a few of them, and they're supposed to be reliable and highly effective. For instance. . . ." They drifted into a discussion of the relative merits and costs as they watched the small shining creature fight its way back through the barrier and into the galaxy.

"I'll have to do something, of course," admitted Aryl. "They can be amusing. It would be a shame to have to destroy them."





K/S

Till now, together,
■ They are more than two,
And separate, ■
■ Less than one.

Bayle
S.
Palko

VISIONS

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Interpretations:

page

Cheryl Rice	
<i>Sea-Change</i>	24
Donna Toutant	
<i>Girl of my Dreams</i>	26
Cheryl Rice	
<i>Sunflower</i>	30
Daphne Ann Hamilton	
<i>(untitled)</i>	32
Ingrid Cross	
<i>Spell Sword</i>	34
Mandi Schultz	
<i>Where Sirens Sing</i>	37
April Pentland	
<i>(untitled)</i>	40
Annelaurie Logan	
<i>Responsibility</i>	43

Sea-Change

Cheryl Rice

Myths are things that never were but that always are. - Salustius

Kirk shivered slightly although the night air was milk-warm. He felt the rocks, solid and real behind his back and legs, the salt water tugging at him. . .caressing. Then he looked again at the woman-creature before him. "You can't possibly exist," he told her and himself firmly.

"Nonsense. Sailors have known us for thousands of years. They see us when they are sad and lonely." She pushed back the heavy, tarnished-gold hair from around her shoulders. "But we have no more time for discussion. Will you come with me or stay? The sky-storm is fast approaching."

In the distance Kirk could hear thunder mutter and grumble. Far flashes of lightning lit up the darkness and in its glow he could see the sea foam cream and dance. "Why must I choose?" He was talking more to himself than his companion.

But she had heard. "The decision must be made. You cannot have both the world of air and of water." She reached out enticing arms. "I offer love, eternal love. . ."

He let himself be drawn forward and felt her cool body against his. . .so cool. But something was not as he thought it would be. "In the pictures I have seen of your kind. . .you always have. . ." For the life of him he could not think how to phrase his worry. He was so tired, so weary.

But she understood his unasked question and laughed lightly. "A tail like a fish. That is only in the myth, Captain. But part of the ancient stories are true. Our song is very sweet and we can promise rest and sweet delight."

Her body held promise of incredible joy. Kirk slipped down in the water with her and their lips met in a deep, lingering kiss that seemed to draw his very soul from his body.

He drew back and gazed upon her beauty. . .dazzling even in the gloom. She was nude, wearing only strands of fire-pearls in her hair, bracelets on one slender arm, and a dull gold necklet marked with some symbols he could not decipher. He ran a finger across their raised surfaces. "What does that say?"

She smiled in secret amusement. "My family motto, Captain. But come with me and I will tell you its story. Hurry, time grows short. . .make your decision." She backed away into deeper water, her hair floating out evenly around her. "Stay and grow old before your time. Come and I will love you forever."

Kirk felt himself irresistably drawn. "Wait. . .I don't even know your name."

She laughed again. "You may call me Ondine. That name will do as well as any other. But decide, now!"

He was torn in two. To go or to stay? He hesitated, looking up at the sky. Overhead it was still clear. . .he could see the reassuring glitter-frost of a myriad stars and the old moon cradled in the new moon's arms. But the storm was growing ever closer. "How can I know what's right? I don't know. . ."

Her exquisite face was rueful. "You know all you ever shall." She fingered the gold at her throat. "My kind has been through this before. I shall survive, but shall you?"

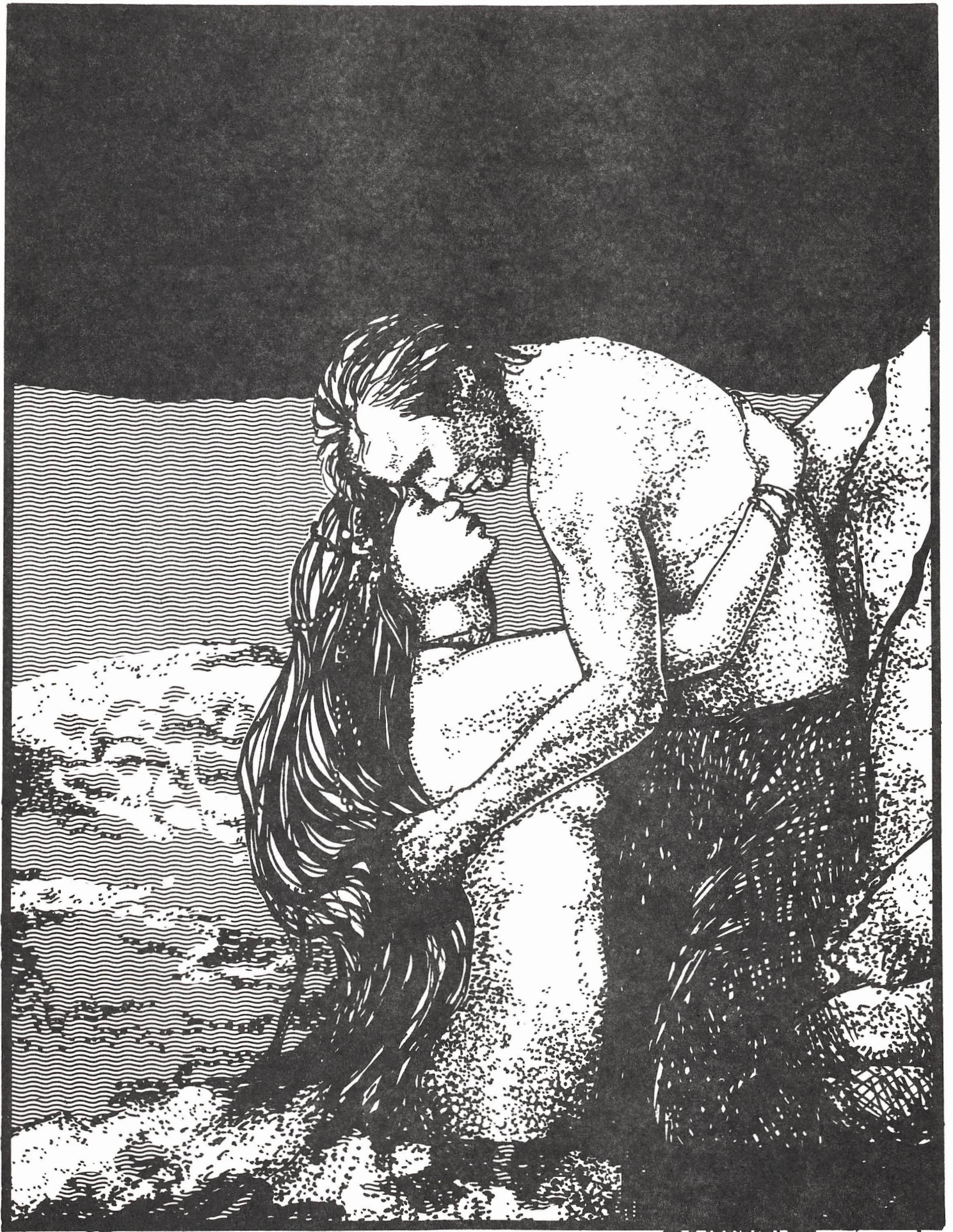
She was in the water now to her neck. Kirk felt the promise of paradise slipping away. "Wait. . . the saying, the motto. What does it say?" It was suddenly of great importance that he know.

She touched the necklet again and her jade eyes flashed disdainfully. "Our feelings toward humans, a remembrance of the way we are usually treated. 'From things about to disappear I turn away in time.' I can, can you?"

She dived then and in a flash was gone. . .only a deeper shadow cutting through the shadowed water.

"Don't go! Don't leave me!" Kirk called out in despair and swam as fast as he could to the point where he had last seen her. "Wait!" He had recognized her at last. . .her elusiveness, her eyes, her six-fingered hand at her throat. His love, his life. Not Ondine. . ."Chantal," he called in despair and said good-bye to the world of air, the world he had known before. He followed her down, blindly.

And he was drowning, drowning. . .



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Girl of my Dreams

Donna
Toutant

GALILEO LOG, STARDATE UNKNOWN: Captain James T. Kirk recording. I have been adrift at sea for some time. Hours . . . days, maybe. I passed out shortly after I managed to pull myself aboard this floating piece of wreckage. I have seen no sign of other survivors. With the exception of this tricorder, which I found floating in the water beside me, I have seen nothing else. No other large pieces of wreckage, no bodies. Only water. Sea water . . . while my thirst grows from minute to minute. How tempting it is to drink from the deadly salted sea. . . .

I don't know how long I was unconscious this time. The time-elapse on the tricorder isn't working. I am badly sunburned . . . almost a match front and back now. When I awoke the first time, I had been lying face down with an arm covering the side of my face. The back of my neck, my right ear and the area around it were blistered from the sun. Both my hands were also burned. This time, I fell face up, and my face is blistered and peeling now. I feel like I must glow in the dark.

I'm dizzy, and seasick, and I'm desperate to tear a strip from my shirt, to cover my head with. But I haven't the strength. In fact, I can't even sit up now. My left leg is injured, and I've lost a great deal of blood. I guess I owe my life to the salt water and the sun. They kept me from bleeding to death . . . so they could extract my life more slowly, it seems. My brain is cooking, and I can't even manage to unzip my shirt or tear it. Spread over me, the cloth might prolong my life, slow the sun's work for awhile . . . but the fastener won't budge, and I have no strength. An arm across my brow will have to do

The sun is getting lower in the sky now. I'm half blind from the glare off the water all day, half dead from the heat, and half crazy--maybe more than half--from the baking my brain is taking. I would kill for a glass of water . . . if there were something to kill. I haven't even seen a fish. Night will be welcome . . .

The night is a nightmare. At first it was a relief, cool, and as my eyes recovered enough, I was able to see the stars, and I lay here gazing at the sky, the way I used to lie in the grass back home when I was a boy . . . look at the night sky and dream of exploring the stars. But then the chills began. I started to shiver, and to long for the heat of the day. I may die of shock before morning.

That isn't my greatest fear, though. There are noises. Something is out there in the water. I know part of it has to be my imagination, and some must be just the lapping of the water. But there is something else, too. Something I can't see in the moonless darkness. It jumps up and plunks back into the water nearby . . . very nearby. Something big.

And it touches this . . . raft, this slab of wreckage that is the fragile divider between myself and the terrible sea. I feel something nudge the edge, and brush against the bottom . . . and I am terrified that I'll be dumped into the water at any moment. The evening meal for some creature of the sea. There are no good ways to die, but some ways are preferable to others, and I find myself wishing I'd died in the crash . . .

. . . it just nudged the raft again and nearly tipped me over. If that happens again, I won't have to worry about dying in the teeth of some sea creature--I'll die of a heart attack!

Sun . . . the blazing sun . . . hours, I think. High . . . in the sky . . . when I woke. Pain . . . burns, headache, cramps . . . can't feel my leg. Not long . . . not long now

A ship! . . . on the horizon . . . too weak to wave . . . too w--No, not a ship . . . mirage. Mirage. . .

Mirages . . . they continue, hour after hour. . . . And the pain Thirst is. . . worst of all. Can . . . only . . . whisper, now. Must keep . . . recording . . . only link . . . with sanity

An island! I see . . . an island. No, Kirk. . . mirage. They're . . . all mirages . . . no island . . . only water . . . and sun

She's beautiful! Kirk thought, and wished he had the strength to lift his hand and touch the blonde hair that fell over her shoulders, partially covering her naked breasts.

Seeing he was awake, the woman wiped his face with a wet cloth. Kirk closed his eyes, enjoying the refreshing caress. His pain was gone, and so was the glaring sun and the deadly sea.



A mirage . . . ? he wondered. *No, more real than that,* he decided. *I feel her gentle touch and taste the sweet water she gives me.* It occurred to Kirk that he'd died and gone to heaven. *Naked women . . . in Heaven?* He had to laugh, a deep chuckle at his own insanity. "I couldn't cope with horrible reality, so my imagination took over," he mumbled.

"Shhh. Don't talk. Drink a little more water, then sleep. Just sleep and get well."

"You're real!" Kirk croaked, his throat so sore he could hardly stand it.

"Shhh. Drink. And sleep." She helped him sip more water, gently restraining him from gulping it down in quantity.

"Thank you," Kirk whispered, then was silenced by a cool finger pressed against his lips.

"Sleep now."

When he woke, Kirk found the woman lying beside him on the bed, asleep. He looked around the room, thinking that it looked like something out of the Arabian Nights. Through the window he saw the afternoon sun shining on a sandy beach, the ocean beyond it looking deceptively tranquil. Kirk luxuriated in the coolness of the palm-shaded room, remembering the terrible heat he'd suffered not long before. *How long ago?* he wondered for a moment, but the question left his mind when his eye fell on the water beside the bed. He helped himself to the refreshing liquid, moving carefully so as not to disturb the sleeping woman. Then he settled back down and drifted off to sleep again.

The next time Kirk woke, it was night. Eerie shadows of the swaying palms danced on the wall, and Kirk watched them in silence, unaffected by their potentially frightening shapes. Feeling utterly secure, he sighed contentedly, thinking, *the nightmare is over. I'm safe. And cared for.*

Moonlight glistened on her blonde tresses as the woman bent over him, once again urging him to drink and then sleep some more.

"Who are you?" he asked, but again her finger at his lips insisted on silence.

"Sleep," she whispered, and he obeyed.

Birds were chirping in the morning sun when awareness came to Kirk again. Alone in the ornate room, he rose slowly, weak, but not overly so. Again, he drank from the glass at the bedside, then examined his nearly healed leg, wondering if he dared try to stand on it. He realized for the first time that he still wore his uniform. But it was clean and fresh, with no trace of blood or sweat on it, and the torn pantleg was the only thing that convinced him it was indeed the same uniform.

"You should not be up," came the soft voice from across the room.

He turned and saw her standing in the curtained doorway, a glass of orange liquid in her hand and looking more beautiful than ever. Seeming totally unembarrassed by her nakedness, she came and sat on the edge of the bed, across from him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am me," she answered simply and held out the glass.

"You must have a name," he insisted. "I am Jim. What is your name?"

She looked at him blankly.

"Your name, what is it?" he repeated, and pointed at himself. "Jim. I am Jim. What are you called?"

"Called? There is no one to call me. I have no name." She lay down, propping herself on one elbow, and again proffered the glass. "The nectar will strengthen you," she told him. "Please drink it."

Kirk took the glass and downed its contents.

"You must lie down now and sleep some more. You are very weak."

"Very weak," Kirk agreed, his eyelids drooping. And inwardly he chided himself, *very weak indeed, Kirk. You're lying in bed with a woman--and all you want to do is sleep!*

The next thing Kirk knew, he was being gently lifted, and he heard a familiar gruff voice.

"Get him onto the litter quickly. Careful with that leg. Christine, get that I-V going."

There was a tingle in his arm, and Kirk felt an intravenous sleeve being clamped into place. Opening his eyes, he saw that he was in the transporter room of the *Enterprise*, with McCoy and Spock standing over him. "Where is she?" Kirk mumbled groggily. "... naked woman ... where ... ?"

McCoy and Spock exchanged glances. "Hallucinations," McCoy diagnosed.

"Yes," Spock agreed. "His last log entry mentions mirages."

"Imagination is a funny thing," McCoy murmured, then added wryly, "A naked woman--leave it to Jim Kirk to conjure up a woman even when he's practically dying!"

"He does have an interesting subconscious," Spock replied dryly.

"Get him to intensive care," McCoy ordered the medical team. "I'll need a surgical kit for that infected leg, Christine. And you men get that filthy uniform off of him as quickly as possible."



Sunflower

Cheryl Rice

PERSONAL LOG: What am I doing here? Why did I allow the Captain to talk me into this? "Come home with me . . . see where I grew up . . . think of it as a scientific experiment. Iowa in August is like nothing you've ever seen. Meet my family and my old friends. They would like to meet you." No one can ever accuse the man of not being an optimist.

The Federation should be very happy the man did not decide on a life of crime. He would probably own half of the galaxy by now. How does he manage things like talking Starfleet Command into a three day visit to his parents' house when he is supposed to be on Earth lecturing and recruiting for the Academy? I am probably better off not knowing. He has entirely too much charm for his own good when he decides to use it. Perhaps for anyone's good.

But I digress. I am giving my impressions of this town. How did that man come from this place? Very quiet, the people here are very independent yet they all seem interested in each other's personal lives. In that way not unlike the atmosphere on the *Enterprise*. But these people have no . . . what is the precise word that I want? No wish for adventure. They are quite content to stay where they are and do whatever it is that they do. To be honest, they are not unintelligent. They ask the right questions. But I doubt if they have ever been farther than Earth's moon or seen a Vulcan before. Or wanted to do so.

I had thought that perhaps he could be explained by heredity. But at last night's family gathering . . . a picnic was the term used to describe it . . . there was no blood relation who shares his intelligence or force of personality. Perhaps his father had some of those qualities.

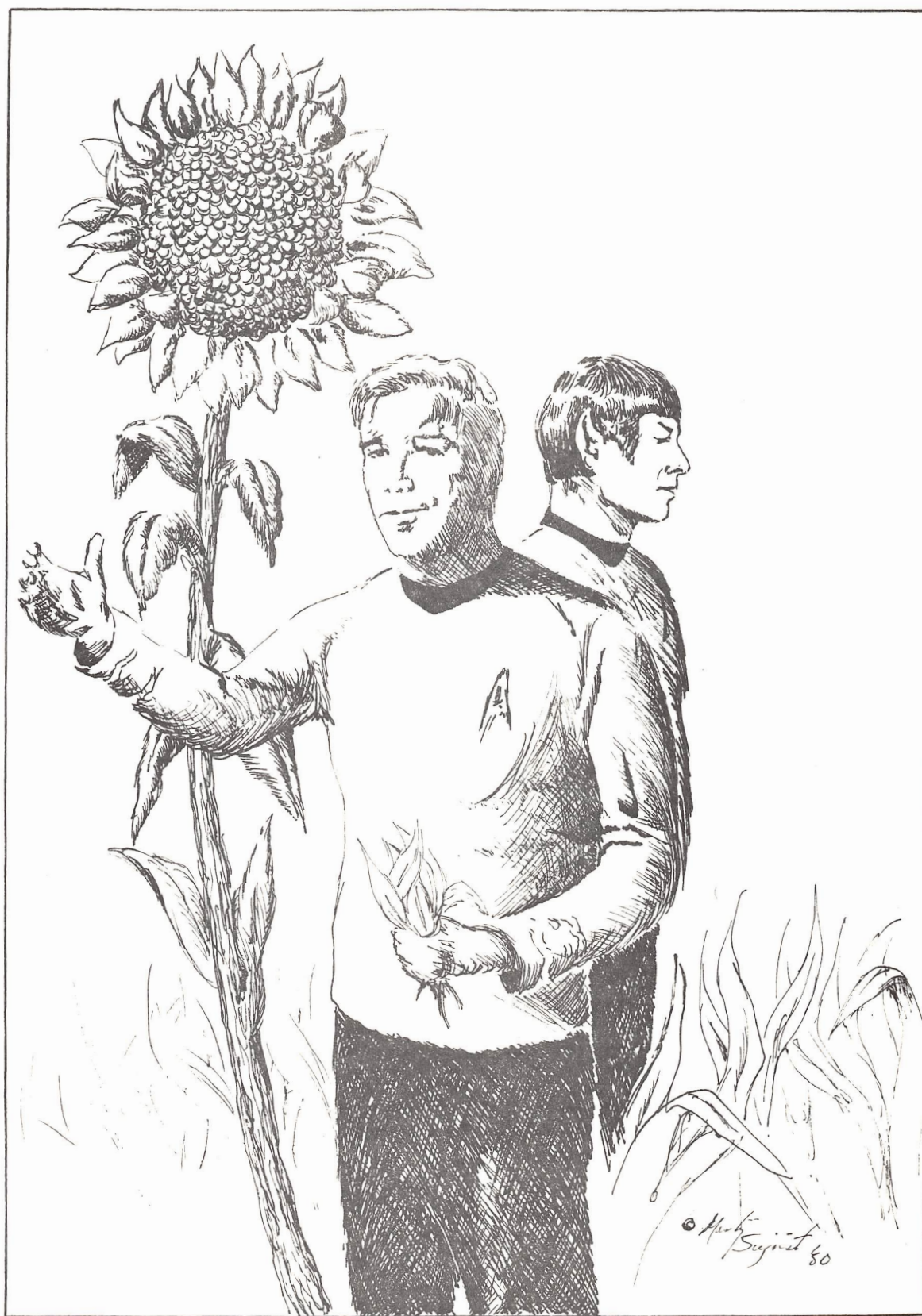
His mother . . . so proud of her status as the widow of a successful bureaucrat that she seems to be making a profession of it . . . had seemed a woman of quiet dignity and grace. Not all that usual in human females of her age and station in life. I had thought her to be commendable for that. But at dinner our hands touched accidentally while passing plates and the thin edge of her thoughts and feelings that I could not help but catch was enough to make one physically ill. I must have allowed some expression of distress to show in my face for he asked me if something were wrong. I said 'no' of course. The small social lie is often necessary when dealing with humans, I have learned. Some day I may understand why it is that I am most Vulcan when around humans and most human when around Vulcans. There is a reason there that eludes logic.

But his mother . . . she hates me. No that is not the precise word to describe her feelings. Hate is most unpleasant, but at least it can often be dealt with. It is a warm emotion. She loathes me like she would some insect she found after turning over a piece of rotting wood. But this feeling is not personal against me. She has this hidden, almost-sickness, against all aliens. Perhaps he went to the stars to escape her prejudices. That is very understandable and logical. But then why return when it is not necessary? She also blames him for his brother's death. It would be interesting to know if he were aware of this.

(*LATER*): He knows. Today, for reasons known only to himself, we journeyed several miles to visit his grandmother's farm. The main fields are full of wheat and corn and are serviced by robomechanisms. But behind the old house is a plot of sunflowers. Their value is in their seeds. But it could be their beauty if one were able to appreciate such a thing on more than a logical basis. They move to follow the sun as it moves during the day. I think though that I am allergic to them. But I cannot think clearly in this humid heat. I am smothering from the excess oxygen. I am not in the slightest at home here. Everything's different. Everything's wrong.

But Jim seems happy enough to be here. We have been talking about homecomings. There are birds that eat these seeds, I understand, after they are dried. The seeds that is, not the birds. He said that he sometimes misses Iowa when he is on the *Enterprise*. His hair is bleaching lighter from the sun. Almost gold. In his uniform he seems made of gold. But he isn't happy here inside. He wants to go back to the ship as soon as possible. He had an argument with his mother. I heard some of it. She told him to leave if he wanted and not bother on her account to come back. Why would anyone send him away? Humans put entirely too much importance on being happy. I want him to be happy. This medication seems to be affecting me strangely. I shall have to erase this portion of my log. Or is this only in my mind? I am allergic it seems to the sunflowers. The doctor Jim called has obviously never treated a Vulcan before. He is saying I am also suffering from heat stroke. A Vulcan is not designed for heat stroke. It is only the dust and the humidity. I must try to tell Jim not to worry about me. Sick bay on the *Enterprise* might not be such a bad place to be, though. I would have more faith in the ministrations of Doctor McCoy right now, though I would not want to admit it. But he is not here, not even on Earth. Jim asked him once why he didn't visit Georgia and he said it was because "you can't go home". I shall have to tell him he was mistaken. You can go home but you will wonder why you bothered.

Jim looks better now. Relieved. The doctor has given me something to make me sleep and he says that if I do not exert myself I should be all right by tomorrow. So I shall have to take his pills and rest if we are to leave on schedule. But before we leave it would have been pleasant to go out in the field and watch the sun flower in Jim's hair.



Daphne Hamilton

Nothing I can do Nothing

And because there was and would be nothing he could do, the memory, like the words, echoed and re-echoed in the hollowness horror had carved inside him:

shock tearing, flashing through the transporter beam (how could I feel it without a body?) . . . the terrible realization that only three stood on the platform . . . the faces of the others: Spock's gone bleak and grim, Uhura's turning away, shining with tears . . . trying--oh God, trying!-- and only freezing, merciless facts: . . . no malfunction . . . no operator error . . . outside energy interference with no apparent source, no traceable path . . . no known technology which could intercept a transporter beam without disrupting it (why aren't we all dead?) . . . Nothing but negatives . . . Nothing

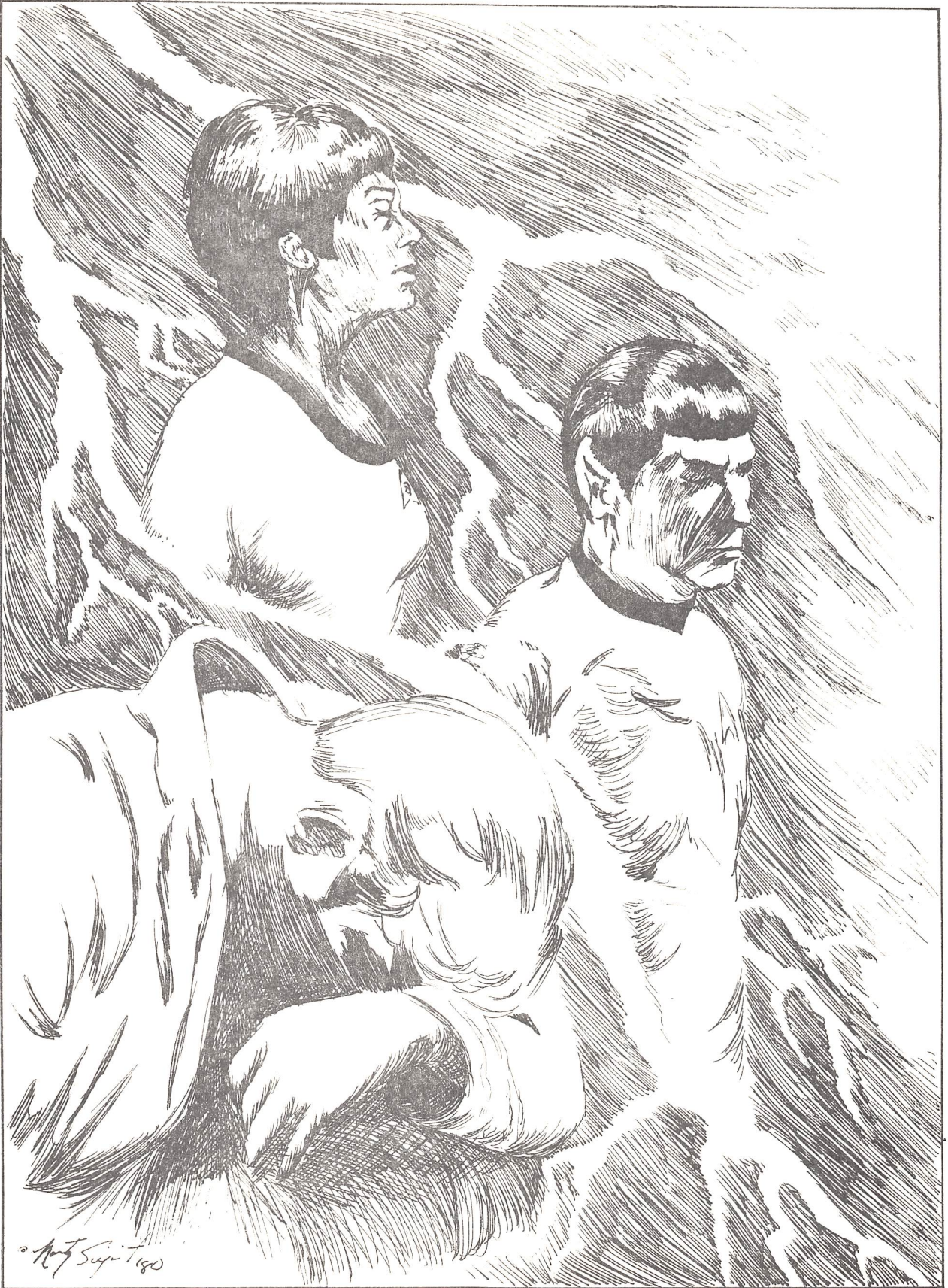
And one of us was gone.

Three survivors. What happened? Dammitalltohell, I've lost crew--and friends--before, but at least I always knew that they were dead--understood how, and maybe why . . . there was never just nothing

He always hated that thing.

And in the void were grief and rage--the abandonment of hope--and, at last, tears.

Damn it, Bones, why? Why you?



Spell Sword

Ingrid Cross

He stopped at the lake's edge, stooped and wiped the sword on the grass. The blood shimmered in the sun before the ground drank in most of it. Then he straightened, looking at the sun which had burnt the back of his neck an hour after he had beamed to the surface of this planet (*but he couldn't remember the beamdown . . .*)

All he could remember were snatches of events leading up to this moment. Something important connected with the sword (*murmured incantations echoing in the darkness*); a very powerful sense of danger. Faces blending into the underbrush in the forest he had just come from.

And then the concrete images recently experienced: his crew, dying in the forest through some stupidity of his own creation (*though he couldn't say what error had been the catalyst*). His crew, loyal to the last and following his every order unquestioningly . . . their bodies strewn across a huge clearing in the woods, death-screams lingering in the air. Searching for Spock, knowing his friend wasn't there. And now, realizing that somehow Star Fleet was responsible for the massacre, that their rules and regulations had tied his hands once too often; now they were going to pay.

No sense of wrongness countered his proposed actions. He felt no loyalty to anyone except his murdered crew. Not even to himself. Hefting the sword in his hand, feeling the reassuring weight as a palpable force, he knew the ones responsible sat within the walled security of that fortress across the lake. Without knowing how he knew all this, he took the first step forward. His one thought was anger; an anger never before fully experienced (*'an eye for an eye,' an inner voice whispered gleefully. The ancient vengeance kindled within his soul*).

Suddenly, without conscious thought, he was on the other side of the water. The dark walls stood between him and those who were responsible. He darted into a doorway left conveniently open, felt pulled forward on the irreversible floes of time and space, found himself standing against the inner wall. The stones were cold against his back, but he forced himself to remain alert.

A sudden movement to his right caused him to wheel around and put the blade up in an offensive gesture (*a spell as ancient as the vengeance flashed through the weapon, shot up his arm, revitalized his strength*). His intuition, always reliable, made him thrust the blade outward, and he twisted the handle viciously as he discovered he had found his mark.

A small cry of glee burst from between his lips and he knew victory, tasted success in his throat. Then the cry died away as he looked through the gathering dusk and saw his victim.

Spock. (*'Your enemy,' the voice breathed. 'Always your enemy, you can't trust him, never could. Only played the game until now . . .'*) He pushed aside that thought and clutched for his friend, pulled the body close to his and tried to help him with his very grasp. The sword slipped from the alien's body and dropped to the stones. A dull light flickered unseen in the depths of the metal.

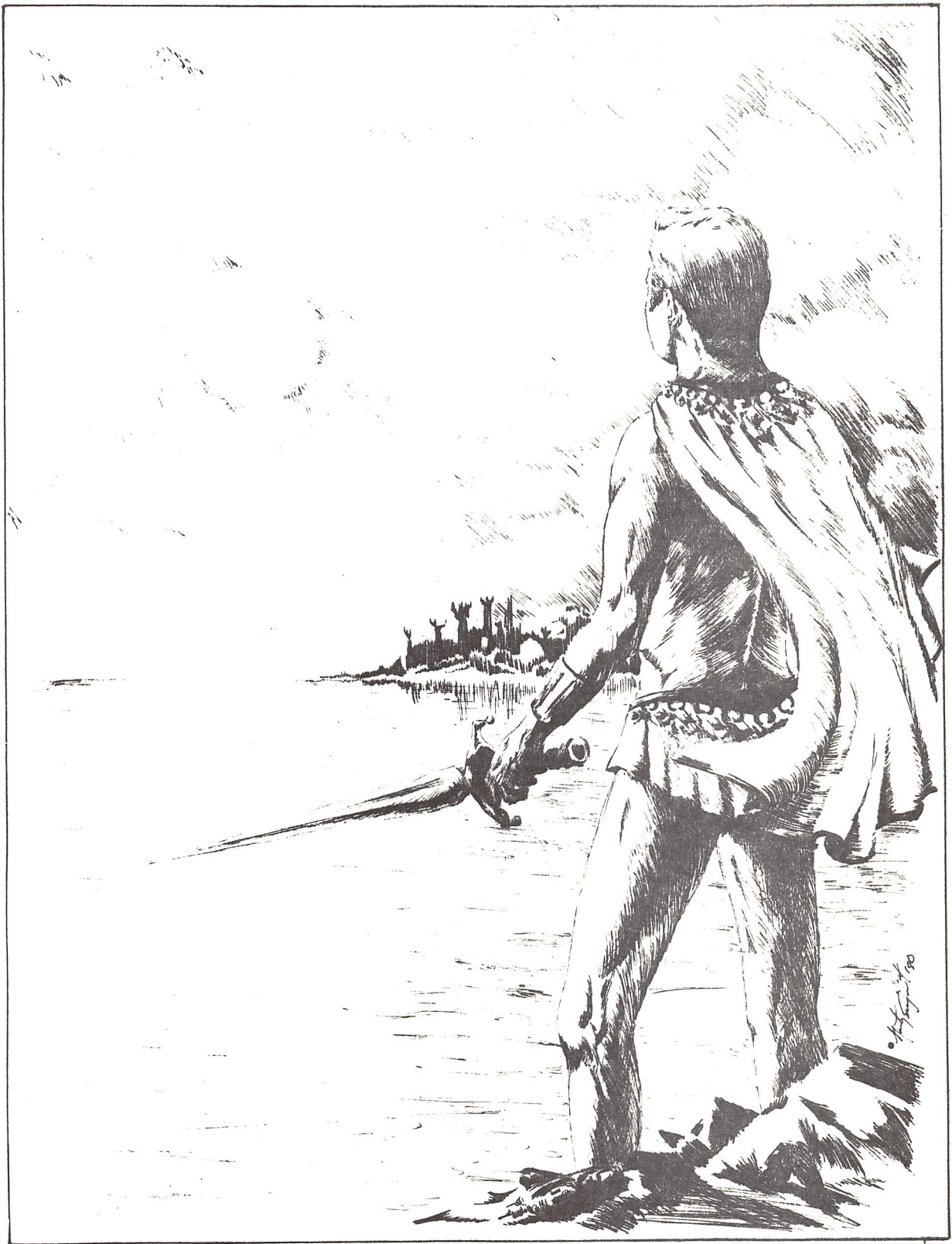
Hard rasping sound. Gulps of air desperately sucked into lungs that had been punctured. The green blood oozed from the chest and splattered Jim's softskin tunic, dripped to his feet.

He wondered why he had hurt his friend, possibly the only person in the universe who had ever understood him completely. But the elusive memory remained just beyond his reach (*echoes of the incantation mocked from the other side of eternity*).

Spock was silent, collapsed against Jim's firm body. Tears fell from the hazel eyes; he discovered he could not speak . . . could not offer solace, relief, explanations. The edges of his reality began to blur and he pulled away from Spock, looked into the brown eyes. What he saw there cut him worse than any sword.

Trust. Fear. Anguish. Surprise. Love.

Just before the universe blinked out for Jim Kirk, the Vulcan died, and the lifeless eyes remained on his friend. The expression of love remained with the captain as he watched the body disappear with the other surroundings.



He was alone. A shudder traced its convulsive way down his spine as he realized what was happening (for the spell/curse had provided this one tantalizing memory at this phase of eternity). Now he could remember what this place was. Not hell, exactly. Nor was it purgatory. But it was a punishment for sins not quite forgiven. Again and again he had lived this scene, knew that again and again he would watch his crew murdered, would swear disloyalty to the Fleet and his every principle. Would kill his closest and dearest friend over and over. There would be no reprieve, no way to escape. But every time the chain of events began to rewind, he would know that he could not escape. He would be aware that he would deny all his beliefs like some machine stuck on one continuous, circuitous program.

The awareness was perhaps the worst part. And he could not stop it, even if he tried to forfeit his life in exchange. Trapped. Suffocating in his own traitorous actions.

Then the brief flash of insight was gone, although his brain suddenly tried to hold onto the memory. He stopped at the lake's edge, stooped and wiped the sword on the grass. The blood shimmered in the sun before the ground drank in most of it. Then he straightened . . .

(Somewhere the spell-weaver smiled in satisfaction. The human had not yet realized the blood on the sword was green. Perhaps that would be the next tidbit to introduce into the man's limited environment. It would be pleasant to watch him squirm just a little bit longer. For he was growing weary of the repetition, and the game should always give novelty.)



Where Sirens Sing

Mandi
Schultz

"Why are they always called *she*?" James Kirk stared deeply into the contents of his half-empty glass, then into the equally unsatisfactory eyes of the companion whose name he didn't remember. The angular face. . . the cheekbones that could cut glass. . . the pale blond hair streaming around a face that might, just might, if he closed his eyes. . .

"Is something wrong, Jimmy?" the girl asked.

He cringed inwardly. No one had seriously called him Jimmy since he was a boy and even then he was of the considered opinion that people had died for less. Absently, he patted the hand he'd been holding when he wasn't holding the glass. These little adventures have got to stop, he told himself. Right now, in fact. Immediately, he totalled up what it would cost to buy her--and himself--off for the evening, uncomfortably aware of the fact that if he wasn't careful, she'd be humiliated by the gesture. How much of his life had he spent courting alien customs he thought were foolish?

Almost as suddenly, the pale face became someone else and he thought he was with a crewman from her first mission. Her. . . there it was again. Why are they always female?

The face suddenly returned to its actual owner. Kirk blinked, then passed his hand over his face while considering the bitter taste of self contempt. Wordlessly, he slapped several credit chips on the tabletop as he got to his feet. "I'm sorry," he said, then turned away, heading, alone, for his rooms.

"Why are they always considered female?" he asked, arms folded across his chest.

Coming from the other side of the hall, Chantal approached him from behind and slipped her arm through his. The two of them stood in silence for some few minutes before the hologram display of early model space exploration vehicles.

"All things considered, it's rather suprising you Terrans worked out FTL as quickly as you did," she said wryly.

"First I'll thank you for the backhanded compliment," he said, "and then I'll remind you that Capellans are still ga-lumphing across the countryside on pack animals."

They exchanged familiar looks. The comments had followed the pattern of a long-time shared joke.

"I was just thinking about a museum I'd been to when I was, oh, about ten years old. They were doing some sort of centennial thing about sailing ships--"

"Vessels for the seas?" she ascertained.

He nodded, then continued. "Even though I've always known that I was going to space someday, I had to admit I was fascinated, even back then, by the sailing ships and the men who took them out. But, I remember," he gestured, "looking at that display. My father was with me and after the narration I asked him why they always referred to the ships, sea or air, as *she*."

"What did he say?"

"He told me that I wouldn't understand that until I understood women." Kirk smiled at the memory as well as the message.

Chantal caught the smile and knew the meaning. "I won't ask you what you learned from that," she grinned.

"That's all right. I learned that my father was a lot smarter than I orginally thought he was. And I've learned that I'd best not hold my breath waiting."

The only sounds in the room were the soft rustling of the bedcovers, the gentle hissing and sputtering of the candles, and an occasional sigh.

"I've got the answer," Chantal whispered in the ear which was, handily, close to her lips.

With an exaggerated groan, Kirk shifted his weight from her and rolled onto his back, reaching to clasp her hand in his own in order to sustain some level of physical contact longer. The question in the museum had turned into a sort of gaming jest over the holiday. . . .at least as far as Chantal had been concerned. Kirk had the distinct impression that she hadn't taken him seriously in the first place. But then, neither had his father all those years before.

"I'm waiting," he ventured. "And fortunately I'm also reclining."

She propped herself up on one arm next to him, tracing invisible patterns on his chest with strands of her hair. Suddenly, she kissed him hard on the mouth, then brought herself back to watch his expression.

"That's nice," he smiled, "but I'm still waiting."

"But that's the answer," she gestured with a six-fingered hand.

"That's terrific," he said, reaching for her. "Tell me again."

She placed the six-fingered hand firmly on his chest. "So I shall. Think about it. *You* call them *she*. Were I to look at it, I would call it a boat, or a ship, or an *it*, but never a *she*. I am *she*, and all my sisters are *she*. But to me, the hulk of airborne titanium is not. Nor is the craft of wood with sails. And do you know why?"

"I thought it best not to hold my breath," he said airily although he admitted to himself he was becoming interested.

"Because I am not the lover. I have no personal relationship with it. I will not live or die for it. It's something to use, no less, but no more."

Kirk nodded in silence. That was certainly true.

"But to the lover, it's become *she*. It gives purpose the way the Mother of All gives life, even the way one's own mother gave life. As a true beloved does, it gives cause and reason for continuing. But it has no conscience and cares nothing for what it takes until you are bled dry. Like the. . . .the. . . ." She gestured again, her exposition disrupted. "What is the story?" she asked. "The sorceresses who lured the men to their doom with their songs? Your Terran myths are so quaint. . . ."

"Sirens," he told her quietly.

She nodded. "The ones. If you give your heart where there's no heart to receive it, you cannot complain about being treated heartlessly. You personify the creation so that you can justify psychologically giving it your life and then you cannot understand why it gives nothing in return when the simple truth is that it has nothing to give. But men," she paused and sighed lightly, "are romantics and elect to remember only the most pleasant aspect of that: what can be compared to the beginning of a romance, the first time with the beloved?" The chatoyant eyes hardened to jade green. "The acquisition of that which you choose to call *she*."

Kirk put his hand on the cool smoothness of her bare shoulder, then slid it along her back until he was able to bring her against him. Even if she was right, he didn't have to remember it in the morning.



April Pentland

Kirk lay back against the jagged rock and tried to ease the painful cramp in his legs. In the cold, still air of the hour before dawn he could clearly hear the movements of the soldiers on the ledges below. They no longer had any need for silence or haste; their quarry was trapped on the summit, too exhausted to resist, too sick and dizzy to escape.

He turned his face toward where a thin streak of icy-green on the horizon marked the approaching sunrise. The movement sent waves of scalding pain through his shoulders and arms. His face contorted with the effort to maintain his silence and his sanity, Kirk stared across the broad valley to the massive peak of Kaladar, the fretted silhouette of the palace barely discernible on its summit. He wondered if he would be able to see the eagles from this distance, and why it should be so important to him to witness their flight again before he died. Surely when the rising sun caught their bright golden wings, he would see it

The eagles. He had spent hours watching their high, endless flight in the days before the coronation. It was odd that he, who travelled with silent, impossible speed across the frozen reaches between the stars, should feel such awe, such envy, of creatures whose flight was limited by atmosphere and gravity. Yet he found in each thrust and arc of the brazen wings a truth more absolute than instinct: the essence and embodiment of freedom, of power, of joy.

The Lady Shazada had watched him as he watched the eagles, had walked with him through the terraced gardens in those scented, silken days of peace, and had told him of the legend. The Kazadim, the great golden birds of prey that soared through his dreams, were the souls of the fierce warrior kings who had carved the jewel-city from the rock of Kaladar and defended it through the ages, and who guarded it still. If the eagles ever ceased in their vigil over Kaladar, it would mark the fall of the Al-Azir dynasty, and the ruin of the city-of-heart's-desire.

Listening to her magical voice, caught in the mystery of her dusted velvet eyes, that seemed to take from him more secrets than he spoke, it had been easy to believe that he had come to a world where all dreams were made real. Easy to ignore the hectic flush that would creep over Lord Shaviar's face as he spoke of his future reign to the other ambassadors, to excuse his speeches as brash enthusiasm. Then had come the day of the final ceremony, and the beginning of the nightmare.

The images lay in his mind, vivid and confused as shards of broken glass. His breath coming in shuddering gasps as the pain twisted through his limbs, Kirk tried to focus on their order.

Shaviar's face as he rose from the altar, the great eagle crown on his head . . . the high windows of the ceremonial hall suddenly darkened by clouds of acrid smoke from the burning Federation buildings . . . the rush of mailed feet as the guards surrounded them . . . steel against his throat, chains about his wrists, as he stood with the others, too drugged to question or resist . . . Pagan fire blazing on the altar, baffling his senses as he tried to comprehend the wild, ranting words of the new-made Emperor -- "Corruption . . . filth . . . infidel dogs . . . plague-bearing idolators . . . alien infestation . . . purge the spirit . . . bring their great warrior . . . corrupter . . . seducer . . . adulterer . . ."

The blackened room, the smell of burning flesh, the wild throb and piping of an ancient tribal chant.. And then, with frightening clarity, the painted face of the Empress Shazada . . . and the infinite sorrow in her eyes as she lifted his face to give him the hot, stinging wine . . . "Be comforted," her voice whispered through his pain, "your star was fixed. It must be thus. Drink. More than was ever promised or foreseen . . ." Cool fingers traced the line of his brow. *"I have promised, and I will fulfill . . ."*

Then, much later, her hand in his, guiding him out of the depths of the prison . . . the hidden gate that opened onto the night and the lush valley of El-Aril . . . "The end of my world comes with the dawn. On Katyan you will find your fate . . . they must find you there . . . joy, and freedom, and triumph repay your loss. Take my love, and the hope of the world . . ."



Kirk had given no thought to the stars above him, or to the *Enterprise*, racing to him now as the news of the terrorism spread through the Federation. Holding only to the tangled memory of her words, he struggled through the quiet farmland and across the wide, gently flowing Aril, toward Katyan, Barren, lonely twin of Kaladar. He had labored through the wooded foothills and begun the steep ascent when he became aware of the furious pursuit, and of the brittle agony stabbing through his arms and legs. Blinded with pain and the consuming need to attain the summit, he had not wondered at the nature of the poison she had given him.

Now there was no need of wonder or regret. His hammering pulse measured the minutes as the light grew and widened above Kaladar, and his bones seemed to warp and twist within him, as though fighting for release. Dimly, through the fever in his veins, he could hear the shouts of the encircling Imperial troops. But still, though his remaining consciousness ached with the need of it, he could not see the eagles

The sun rose beyond Kaladar; the city was washed in its bloody, molten radiance as though it had pierced its heart. The light struck the face of Katyan like a blow, and Kirk cried out in a final agony of pain and loss. The cry was harsh, wild, inhuman--and was answered, again and again, in a language he had always known, as the warriors of the dawn swooped from the sunlight to greet him. The thunder of their wings beat like blood in his ears; the savage brilliance of their plumage caught and shattered the light into a blaze of gold and scarlet. As the dizzying tumult claimed his senses, Kirk could hear the despairing cries of Shaviar's troops as they broke and fled, away from the triumphant Kazadim, back toward the city and the Emperor whose ruin was ordained.

Kirk no longer knew of the city of Kaladar, or of the insignificant world spinning away beneath him. Above him soared the vast, delirious vault of sky, where winds edged chorusing through the silvered sunlight. And around him, proud, imperious, spurred and armored with the colors of the sun, the beckoning masters of the air, the Kazadim, his brothers. He reached toward them, with arms that were no longer arms, toward the wild, ecstatic glory of wind and light and freedom; and the sun kindled the wide golden wings to a greater power, and the wind lifted him, engulfed him, and clasped him close.



Responsibility

Annellaurie
Logan

Kirk staggered and leaned more heavily on his tall staff as another blast of icy wind howled down from the highest peaks. Several inches of frozen slush made the footing on this upgrade treacherous, and the color of the clouds behind which the pale orange sun was setting promised more snow within the next few hours. He heard a gasp and a thump behind him, and turned to see Spock haul McCoy back to his feet. Kirk almost managed a grin; the clumsy hide boots they'd bought in the last village below the treeline didn't provide much traction for men used to starship corridors. He sobered quickly as he saw that the long day's climb had pushed the doctor to the edge of his endurance; come to think of it, Spock didn't look very good either--the heavy hooded tunics favored by the natives probably gave the Vulcan even less protection from the cutting winds at this height than they did Bones or himself.

Jim shivered and tried without success to fasten his own cape a little more securely. The villagers had assured them--truthfully?--that they could reach the monastery at the peak before dark. And certainly this was no country for camping out; the only proper equipment they had were their communicators, and those could only be used at the last extremity: signalling the Enterprise would mean admitting defeat.

The doctor panted as he pulled himself wearily over yet another rock slide, not really able to properly use the thick rod that was a shorter and plainer version of Kirk's elaborately carved walking stick and all-purpose weapon. He had enough breath left, however, to deliberately curse the weather, the road, the villagers, the local costumes, and the day he'd first heard of this misbegotten mudball of a planet.

"Illogical, Dr. McCoy," Spock told him calmly. "You did volunteer for this expedition. . ."

"--And, of course, in the simplest sense he *did* volunteer," added the oldest of the three women. Her partner looked up from her notecoder as the technician at the wall console moved levers and checked gauges as she tried to match and follow the graph of brain activity typical of REM sleep.

"This is the Federation starship captain? Did you choose this dream, or did the man himself?"

"It was suggested--we suggested--that he dream of himself on a Quest with his companions. His responses, and those very different dreams of the two friends who cared enough for him to submit themselves to this sort of electronic prying, should give us an idea of what sort of man the captain is. . .and, we hope, show us a way to end his persistent nightmares."

The second woman nodded. "I read the medical notes. There are limits to the continual use of sedatives and stimulants to avoid dreaming of murders and monsters and catastrophes; apart from the not inconsiderable danger of physical addiction, the rebound effect guarantees more dreams, possibly nastier ones, when their victim stops taking the pills. A man who has five hundred lives under his command can't successfully carry himself on chemicals and fear for very long. If we can't find a way to end the night terrors. . ."

At the display screen, the technician shuddered. "To have to give up one's job--that's a reason for nightmares!" she said softly, more or less to herself. She was a good worker, on a planet where craftsmanship and technical skills were highly valued, and the thought of being cast out of her guild--condemned, shamefully, to joblessness--for providing inferior service seemed the worst sort of hell to her.

"But surely--" the woman with the notecoder continued, "--his guild must know more about the occupational hazards of his position than we can learn in a few days' examination! Couldn't the doctors of the Federation help him? It's true that this institute--that *you*, Mistress--has had more success with dreamshaping than any other, but it remains very much an experimental procedure."

Her companion shook her head. "The captain is determined not to let his superiors know about his problems. Reprehensible by our standards, given his considerable responsibilities, but--" she gestured in an indication of dismissal, "--who knows what outworlders expect? He knew that we did good work, he was quite properly impressed with the repair work we did on his ship's computer system. . ."

" . . .Even though all the 'compliments' we got from him were complaints about giving the machine the proper sort of vocal programming. . ." the technician muttered.

"...Well, those people think that machines should sound like 'machines'," the older woman responded absently. "Also, they have some quaint taboos against the association of females with delicate equipment, which probably explains why their technology in the useful arts is so unsophisticated when compared with ours. In any case, desperation drove him to confide in us rather than in his proper advisors."

The other doctor said diffidently, "I think, perhaps, that he came to us because he thought we could, um, 'repair' him. It does not sound as though he really wanted to be 'cured'. . .he seems to fear that this would somehow impair his proper functioning. . .he just wants to reduce the evil dreams to a level where he can carry on as a starship commander."

Her superior looked suprised. "That may be important. . ."

Yes, Kirk thought, they had all volunteered for this: an espionage mission on an insignificant planet in the disputed zone between the Federation sphere of influence and the Klingon Empire. For, if the rumors of the strange crystals guarded by monks in the planet's mountainous ranges were true, this could be another source for the dilithium crystals both powers so desperately needed. If the sacred mines really yielded potent power sources for starships and space stations, it was his duty to track them down.

He fingered the intricately carved gold brooch (shaped like the head of the same fierce fanged animal as the one on his staff) holding his cloak closed. The natives who'd sold the three of them the proper clothing for this mountainous trek (none of it as warm as a thermal suitliner, and all of it bulky enough to feel like he was carrying a forty-pound pack on his back in the thin air) had recognized him as a leader of men, someone with responsibilities far greater than those of even such Federation representatives as his two friends. If the crystals were dilithium. . .he wondered how he might persuade the monks to allow him to abstract a crystal or two for analysis. He wondered if he might be forced to steal them (hopefully not; it would only make it harder for the diplomats to make a deal later).

He wondered if the Klingons had figured out yet that the Enterprise had slipped into the demilitarized zone. He wondered if Scotty was handling his ship properly; a good man with mechanics, Scotty, but he didn't understand human beings--he couldn't rally his followers behind him the way he, Jim, could. Kirk worried about getting his five hundred charges safely out of this dangerous territory. But if he could pull off such a coup. . .idly he fantasized about how much a reliable source of dilithium would be worth to the armchair spacejockeys back at Starfleet Central.

"Notice his sense of priorities," the older doctor pointed out to her colleague. "First protect one's crewmembers, then wonder about the benefits of one's action upon one's career. Laudable."

"There's certainly nothing wrong with his self-esteem," the other woman at the desk said. "An obvious leader of men! Did his friends dream this way, too? I understand that they are his subordinates, yet surely they have more than a little power over the general run of the ship's crew themselves."

"That's an interesting point. I've monitored the Quest dreams from both of them; apart from the expectable physical differences--the doctor is apparently one of the minority who habitually dream in color, and the science officer, the Vulcan, 'imagines' a great deal more of the sounds and scents of reality than a full-blooded human would in his soulwanderings--the biases of the two would seem to indicate one of the basic dichotomies of the Federation culture. The Vulcan, who is respected--even, he thinks, a little feared--by his shipmates, dreams of doing something dramatically self-sacrificing enough to earn their love as well. The surgeon, who believes that most of his charges love him already, wants to earn the power to make them respect him as well. Neither of them, it seems, entertains the belief that affection and respect might both be possible, simultaneously. Even the Captain, who has a far greater estimate of his own abilities, tends to divide his men into those who fear him, and those who worship him."

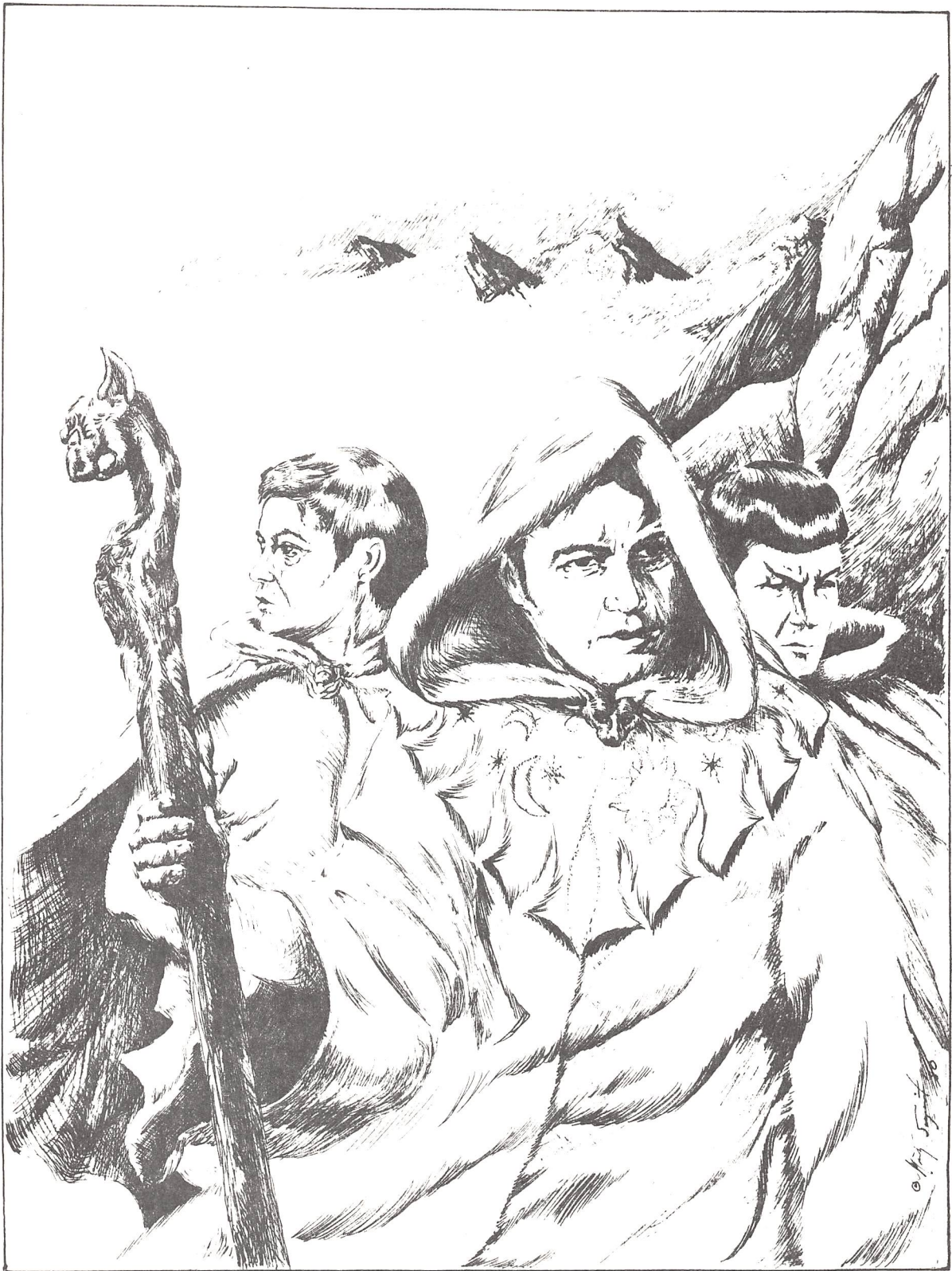
The technician interrupted them. "The dream is fading out rapidly. I don't think I can keep him under much longer."

"Do your best." The two doctors watched intently as her fingers flew over the complicated panels. After a moment, the older woman went over to the board and took over some of the secondary functions. But the images wavered, blurred and fogged, and finally faded away altogether.

The doctor at the panel sighed. "You did your best, Technician. More than I had hoped for, in fact; I compliment you." She turned to face the third woman. "Will you go and wait with our client, Doctor, or shall I?"

"He shouldn't need any real medical assistance, should he?" the technician added carefully. "I can go in and assist him in awakening. I *am* a paramedic, after all."

Her helper nodded. "Would you be willing to do that? Thank you--it's true that I'd prefer to show my companion the records of some other dreams. If he gives you any trouble--if he has questions you can't, or don't wish to, answer--please page us in the viewing rooms upstairs. Come, Doctor. . ."



They gathered up their notes and equipment, and exited arguing amicably. The technician watched them go, and waited a long moment before going through the small inner door to the room where Kirk, stretched out on a monitor-bed more sophisticated than anything available in the best experimental medical centers of the Federation, rose gradually and muzzily from the fog of induced sleep.

She watched him patiently. When he was alert enough to sit and stare back at her, she said, "I think I can help you, Captain. I think you can help me."

"Yeah? Who are you?" Kirk was not going to commit himself to anything without more details.

"I am a technician, Captain, like yourself. Scholars--people like the doctors here--don't appreciate craftspeople's thinking patterns. They know that you are not happy about accepting their help without paying for it, but they don't realize how important it is for you to carry your own weight."

He looked at her for a long moment. "Yes. I *have* money--quite a lot of it, by anyone's standards--and I would certainly be happier if some reasonable fee. . ."

"We don't need *money* here; the government gives us everything we ask for. The doctors think that you offered us your cash in the spirit of scientific inquiry, or just to ensure that we gave you everything we have to give. They don't understand that those of us who work with our hands have our own kind of pride. You feel as though you're being extended charity, don't you?"

Uncertainly, he nodded.

"That's the main thing bothering you, isn't it?"

He nodded again, more definitely.

"You want to pay for what you're given. I would, myself, in your place." She hesitated. "I am not speaking for my superiors, Captain. In fact, I would be most strongly reprimanded if they could hear us now. But. . .will you give me your word not to repeat what I tell you? Remember, I think that I can help you as much--almost as much--as you can help us."

Kirk thought about it. "All right. I don't promise I'll do what you want--I have my men and my position to protect--but I'll keep quiet about it no matter what."

"Well. . .you know, Captain, that we are not space explorers. We send out ships on a few regular trade routes, but we stay along the marked trails. Also, our military powers cannot hope to match yours. We are well enough defended here at home, but we can't equip our ships with the kind of weaponry the *Enterprise* carries."

"On the trade routes, you shouldn't need to. Has there been some kind of trouble recently?"

She sighed. "We--my superiors, our leaders--have tried asking for assistance through the regular channels of Federation diplomacy. But they say that it takes place within our home system, and it isn't their jurisdiction. . .you see, Captain, there's a pirate in our skies."

"WHAT?"

"There's an Orion ship. . .it seems to be just the one ship, and we're almost sure it's from Orion. . . which has already hijacked two of our merchant vessels. The first one they looted and blew up--with the crew still aboard. They demanded a ransom for the second: we paid, and they returned most of the crew--those that hadn't died defending themselves--but destroyed the ship anyway. And now they call to tell us they've captured a third. . ."

Kirk shook his head. "Another ransom demand?"

She nodded. "Unfortunately, after Starfleet refused to help us, we decided that we can't afford to pay blackmail indefinitely. . .the export trade just isn't worth it. All space handlers since then have been volunteers; we voted that any ships hijacked would be abandoned to the pirates, their crews considered casualties as soon as we hear from the Orions."

"So you're just going to let them die?" He was wide awake now; despite his reservations, the situation had completely conquered his attention.

His bluntness made her wince. "They agreed to their fate, Captain. And I think that now we will be afraid to send out any more ships, at least until the pirates grow bored waiting and seek out another world to victimize."

"I think I can understand what you want from me, now. You figure that I have the *Enterprise* right here circling the planet anyway. . ."

"...One assumes that you have not been specifically forbidden to assist a Federation planet in difficulty..."

"...and you want me to save your friends. You say the others don't know you're here? Why not?"

She considered. "This is a research institute, Captain. I doubt that my superiors here have even heard about the ship, yet. But one of the captured crew is my sister...her insurance company contacted me..." She dropped into a seat. "I can't ask you--we can't ask you, officially--for any help. But I don't want my sister to die that way. *If* you could disarm the pirates and rescue our people, we would be hugely grateful, I'm sure. Certainly it would more than repay anything we could do to help you with your, uh, problem..."

He grinned mirthlessly. "Do you really think that, knowing what you've told me now, I could just forget about the whole thing and sit here on my--butt--with your doctors snooping through my brains?"

"I had hoped not. What will you do, Captain?"

"First, I need to talk to someone with some real authority. We'll need any information you've got on this pirate--the size and speed of the ship, the size and any identification of the captured merchant, the possible locations of their hideaway..." He stood and started for the door. "Who's in charge here, anyway?"

The *Enterprise* was loafing its way out of the system at a tangent from the area where the skyjackers had tentatively been pinpointed. Kirk had not encountered any resistance to his plan from the planetary First Commission; he'd told them that he'd swing his ship out of range to disarm any suspicions on the pirate's part, circle around, and approach them swiftly from the opposite quadrant. It wouldn't do to panic the criminals now and have them kill the hostages. All they could do for the moment was wait...

Kirk was asleep. Spock had orders to call him to the bridge at the first sign of trouble. They wouldn't be ready to warp out and turn the ship around for nearly ten hours. The commander of the *Enterprise* lay in his darkened cabin and moaned. The dream was beginning again.

The jagged rock scraped his bare back as he shifted his feet on the narrow ledge, easing his aching muscles as far as the steel shackles holding his wrists pinioned to the wall would allow. He squinted into the glare of the sun, watching the dark shapes of carrion birds circle lazily in the air, waiting for him...waiting for him to give up, to stop fighting, to slump and slide and...

His attention was distracted from the birds and the demands of his body. Something slid across the ledge. Something bright and unnaturally green moved towards his naked feet...Adrenalin coursed through his system with a sickening shock as he saw the great snake, its body as thick as his wrist, curl out of its den and move towards him, attracted by the heat of his body on this cool and windy peak or by the scent of warm blood.

He hated snakes, hated and feared them all. One of his best friends had died on a camping trip, writhing and convulsing from the fangs of a tiny black reptile just a foot or so long. His friend had turned blue and died gasping for air as his nervous system collapsed from the effects of the venom. He'd watched desperately as they'd waited--too long--for the emergency 'copter to reach them.

His friend had died, and he had not been able to do anything at all to help him.

At the hospital they scolded him. If the two of them had had the sense to carry the proper anti-venom serum, the doctors told him, his friend would not have died...but he was dead, because Kirk had been negligent...

He gasped and froze as the great green monster slid across his feet. The huge hooded head rose, swaying gently, as the snake began to twine its glossy bulk across his legs. Sweat trickled down his face as he watched the reptile twist obscenely around his body, slowly, slowly rising...The lidless yellow eyes trapped his vision as the snake spread its hood and curved gracefully towards his neck, long white fangs full of cold golden death sinking towards his throat...he was trapped...

The wailing of a siren brought him back to consciousness with a jerk, nightmares forgotten as he punched the intercom button and yelled for Mr. Spock. Within ten minutes he was back on the bridge, signalling a yellow alert as the Orion pirate ship, somehow alarmed by their maneuvers, shot away from its hideout and towards the edge of the system like the guilty thing it was.

Settling into his command chair, Kirk frowned at the viewscreen where the image of the smaller ship was rapidly moving out of range.

"Wonder what they've done with the ship they hijacked," he said. "If we can pick them up when they're carrying contraband from the other ships. . .hmmm. . .I take it there will be no trouble keeping up with them, Mr. Spock?"

The science officer straightened and stepped down from his post to stand by the captain's chair. "I must point out that we are not commissioned as a security vessel, Captain. Logically we have no reason to interfere with the presumed Orion ship. Star Fleet regulations--"

"Don't feed me the rule book, Spock, I know it as well as you do." Kirk grinned. "Navigator, ahead warp two. I want you to crowd that ship up there as close as you dare. Lt. Uhura, this is a red alert. . ."

". . .And, just as I'd hoped, when we pushed them they panicked. No innocent ship would have done more than question our navigation when we appeared just this side of their shields. After they'd fired the first salvo at us, naturally we had no choice but to defend ourselves. . ."

"Of course," the doctor murmured.

"Luckily, they weren't bent on suicide or anything as drastic as that. They were Orions--you were right about that--but they don't seem to have had any kind of official status. (You can never be sure of that, with the Orions.) Just another bunch of, er, small businessmen." He lay back on the monitor-bed. "Can you tell me one thing?"

The doctor looked up from her checklist. "If I can."

"That woman--the technician--the one who told me about your skyjacker in the first place. Do you happen to know if her sister made it? Was she one of the survivors when we backtracked after the battle and found the crippled ship waiting?"

She smiled slightly. "She's at the medical center with her right now. I hope her replacement can do half so well at the monitoring panel. We are, all of us, very much in your debt, Captain. We had nearly lost hope in the justice of Star Fleet. Now. . .as well as saving the lives of the individuals on that one ship, you've made it possible for us to keep the trade routes open. We could manage--for a while at least--without the imports; but it would have severely injured our national pride. Inconvenient."

He relaxed on the bed. The doctor was about to leave the room when he added, "I lost another crewman hunting down the pirates. He was standing too close to a powercell bank when it fused and blew up. His death was my responsibility--they're always my responsibility, one way or another--but I saved nearly forty crewmen from *your* ship--it must balance out somehow. This time I *know* I made the right choice. . . this time. . ." The last words trailed off into a snore as the sleep-inducers the doctor had administered took effect.

She watched him from the doorway for a moment. "Your responsibility--yes, Captain. Goddess grant that we can give you what you want. . ."

Her partner was waiting in the larger room. A different woman stood before the banks of lights and levers. They looked up as she entered.

She sat down and let out her breath in a long sigh. "Remember your earlier hypothesis, Doctor? You said that perhaps our captain here did not wish to be cured so much as--how did you phrase it?--'repaired'. Well, he pays his debts; so do we. I think he's earned the right to dictate his own terms, however little we care for them. . ."

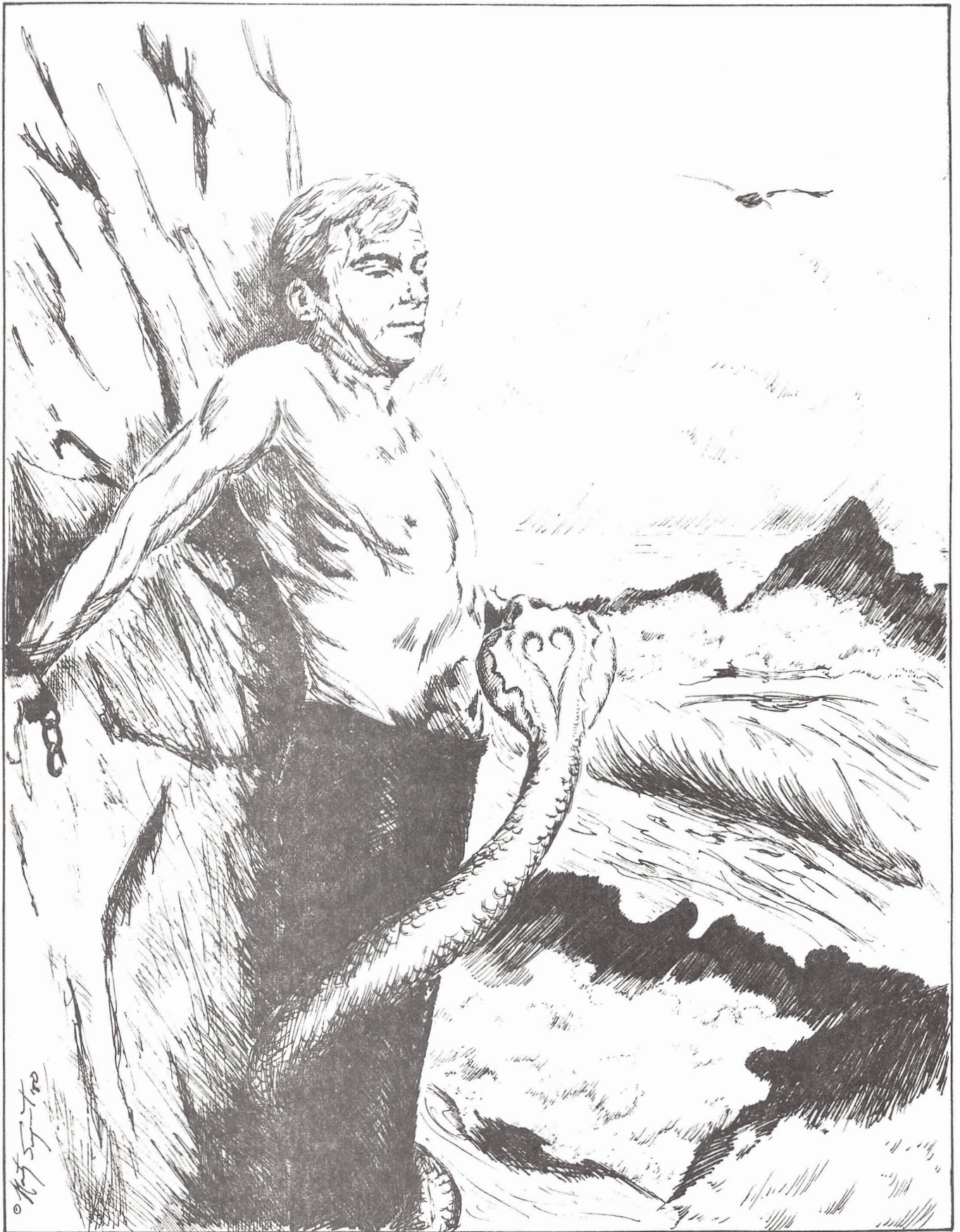
"It's an enormously responsible position, being a captain in one of those Federation ships," her assistant said. "Not the sort of life many would choose, to be held accountable for the lives and the actions of hundreds of other people as well as one's own. Yet it seems to be all-important to this man. And we can be grateful for that, I think. . ."

The technician at the instrument panel interrupted them. "You'll want to be planting some kind of a hypnotic suggestion, then?" Her tone of voice suggested that she didn't have the time or the inclination to waste on speculation about other people's abstractions.

The other two looked at her, and at each other, and abandoned theory for the moment. "Very well, Technician," the older doctor said neutrally, "see if you can hook in the proper tape to call up the most representative of the subject's nightmares. Unless," (a certain sternness, as well as sarcasm, entered her voice) "you'd prefer to desert your job and come take mine instead. . ."

The shaft went home. Her subordinate blushed as she bent over the gauges.

The younger of the two doctors turned on her notecoder. "Some cue that he can use in the future to



short-circuit his terrors. . .something appropriate to the subject and his image of the universe. . ."

"Something, particularly, simple enough to be highly reliable," her associate reminded her. "What the man needs right at the moment is a technique he can integrate quickly for dissipating the evil dreams."

He tensed as the monstrous snake slid across his bare feet. His muscles tightened involuntarily as the green horror started to rise, the great fanged head weaving to and fro, the hood flaring as the jaws rose inexorably towards his throat. . .

There was a metallic click, a single sharp report as of an overstressed link snapping open. His right shoulder dropped as the chain shackling him on that side broke and separated. His right hand was free!

He forced himself to hold the arm steady for another long moment, as the reptile continued to move supplely around his torso. He restrained his screaming nerves as he willed himself to bring his free hand forward slowly, a fraction at a time--if he should frighten the snake now, if he should surprise it and have the grotesque head shoot forward and fasten into his flesh--he shuddered as he thought of the golden venom coursing through his veins, poisoning his nerves, eating into the sensitive tissues, killing him by inches as he hung here helpless. . .

He saw his chance and took it. Just one chance--

He'd managed to grab the big head at just the right point, close behind the hinge of the vicious jaws, too close to the dangerous fangs to let the monster turn and rend him. It writhed ineffectively in his grip, the powerful muscles along the extended backbone trying desperately to pull free as Kirk struggled every bit as desperately to hold the snake secure. Gradually, an inch at a time, he forced the jerking, hissing head back towards the wall of bare rock, his elbow flexed at an awkward angle as the reptile's jaws gaped inches away from his ear. Another three inches--suddenly he jerked his wrist back hard. The deadly fangs sank harmlessly into the rock, snapping off against the stone, the poison pumping futilely from the ruined jaw and trickling down the ledge.

He'd done it.

The beast redoubled its struggles, twisting frantically to free itself. Somehow he managed to trap it a little longer, holding it twisting fiercely out at the full length of his arm again, until he could be absolutely sure that the fangs were useless and its venom drained away safely.

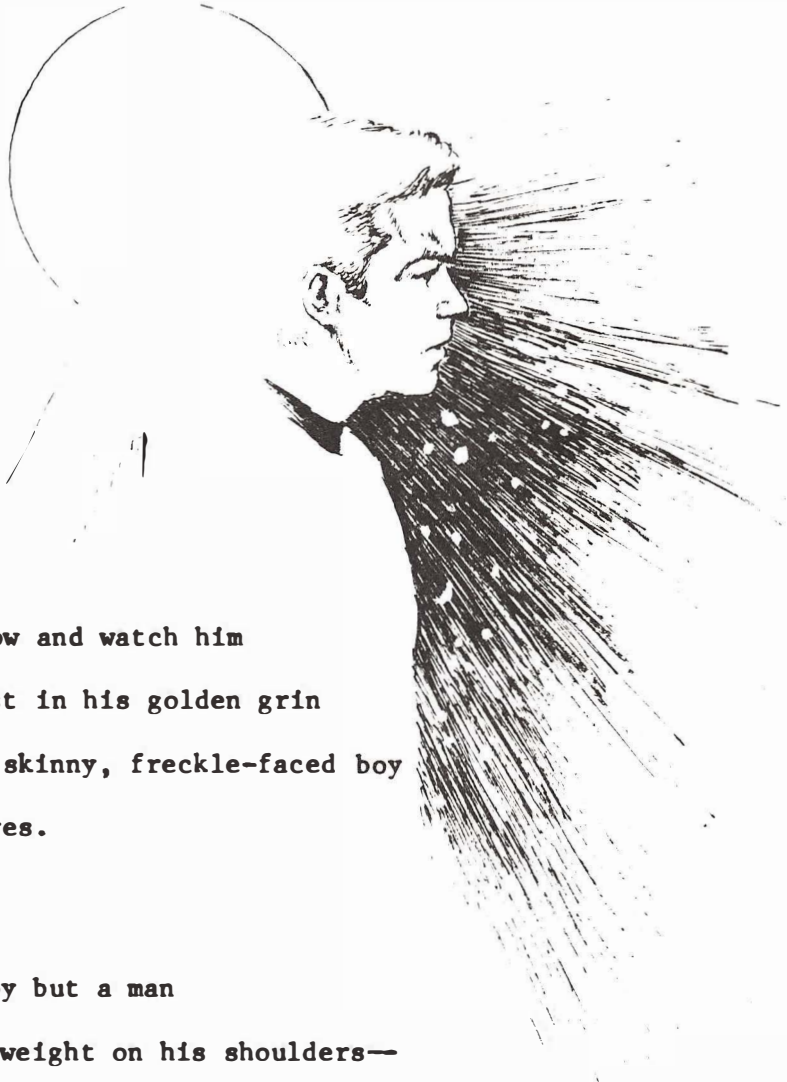
He'd done it! He'd saved himself! He'd taken the responsibility for his own security, and it had worked!

He felt a great warmth encompass him. The whole world rocked about him as he slid into a deep and comforting blackness. . .

Captain Kirk, of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, was smiling as he slept.

Home

Leave



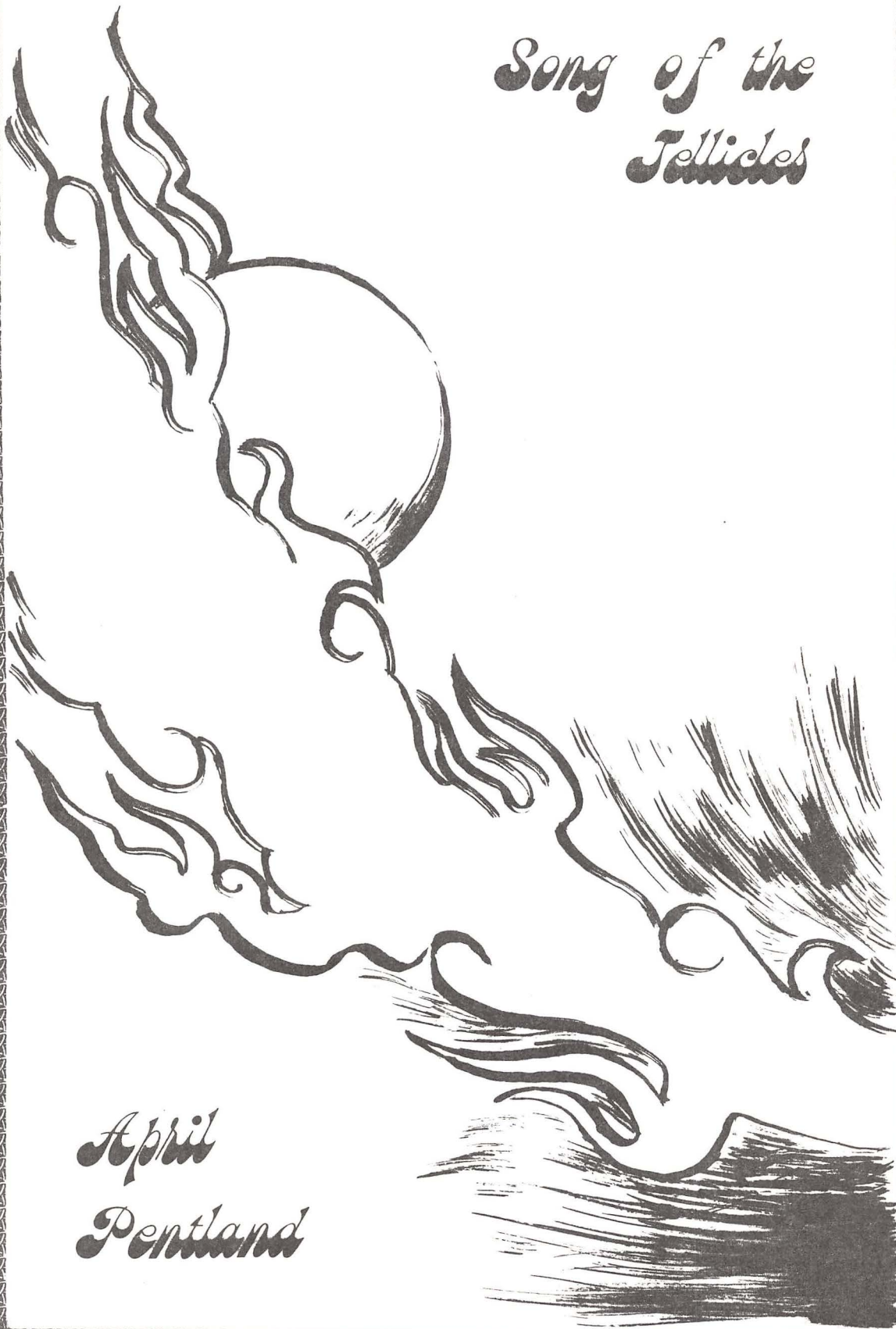
He's home.

I stand at the window and watch him
Reliving summers past in his golden grin
Remembering a tall, skinny, freckle-faced boy
With stars in his eyes.

But illusions fade
And soon I see no boy but a man
Who carries a heavy weight on his shoulders—
The fruits of my transaction with Star Fleet.
I gave them a son
And they gave me a starship captain.
And a worse bargain I never made.

L. Jeanne Powers

*Song of the
Jellicles*



*April
Pentland*

*Jellicle Cats come out tonight,
Jellicle Cats come one come all:
The Jellicle Moon is shining bright--
Jellicles come to the Jellicle Ball.*

T.S. Eliot

"Jellicle, Captain." Uhura's voice behind him was quietly precise. "The closest approximation of the name is Jellicle, not Callico. Of course, it's only an approximation."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Kirk returned to his contemplation of the planet's surface. It was an ordinary, comfortable-looking planet, scarcely larger than Earth's moon, the lone satellite of its white-giant star. The *SS Henry Thomas* had been lucky to stumble on it when her navigation systems blew, luckier still to find an advanced and friendly civilization willing to allow them to effect repairs. The crew had reciprocated by blatantly patronizing the natives, babbling about their own culture, and bestowing the precious nicknames that Uhura's skill and sensitivity had just coolly dismissed. Kirk wondered if the natives would consider themselves as fortunate to find their world so precipitately introduced into the galactic community. Whether all the combined resources of the Federation would ever achieve anything more than a rough approximation of the culture was an exercise in speculation and value judgment that, Kirk reminded himself, was none of his business.

"Completing final orbit for sensor scan, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu. Set synchronous orbit above the capital city."

He crossed to the library computer. Spock had not spoken since they had completed orbital insertion, his concentration fixed on the hooded viewer. At Kirk's approach he straightened, removing the micro-receiver from one elegant ear, and presented the pertinent data.

"Captain, because the *Henry Thomas* is, in effect, a privateer not officially registered with Starfleet, their contact with this culture six months ago, however arbitrary and disorganized, cannot be legally defined as a violation of the Prime Directive. Contact was limited to a small coastal town on the southern tip of the large continent, but news of the visit has spread, through an extensive communication network, to their capital city. I can gather no information on their form of government or social systems, however. Agricultural and technological development appears highly advanced; and the culture would seem to be at a level where spontaneous advancement to a dynamic identity is possible." One eyebrow lifted in the Vulcan equivalent of a shrug. "Interesting, Captain."

"Indication of anything unusual enough to warrant starship investigation?"

"Nothing in the information we have gathered so far, sir."

Kirk had a very clear and definitive idea of duty, but there were times when the words duty and chore overlapped. Being sent to investigate the possible corruption of an officially unclassified race was one of them. But he sighed philosophically and, reaching past his First Officer, flipped on the intercom.

"Kirk to Transporter Room. Set coordinates to beam the landing party down outside the capital city. We'll walk in from there."

"Kirk to Sickbay. Doctor McCoy to the transporter room."

"Mr. Spock, you will accompany me and Doctor McCoy. Mr. Sulu, you have the con. Maintain standard orbit. Lieutenant Uhura, set up a monitoring pattern of their communications system. If you find anything that doesn't fit in with the readings we've obtained, contact us immediately. We'll follow standard landing party procedure."

McCoy summed it up just before they beamed down. "Well, with any luck we'll be back in time for supper."

It was a warm, autumn-bright world. The air was clear, richer in oxygen than that of Earth, the pull of the planet beneath their feet decidedly less than Earth-normal. Spock took readings, the precise hum of his tricorder piercing the thick, drowsy silence.

"Anything our sensors didn't pick up from the ship, Mr. Spock?"

"Completely consistent, Captain."

McCoy was smiling. "I like the color scheme."

Although the vegetation was simple and sparse, the rolling terrain conveyed no sense of barrenness.

Gray and gold, in every shade and intensity, created a pervading aura of peace and warmth. The grass was like soft gray moss that seemed to go on forever.

"The city lies in that direction, Captain." Spock nodded toward the northwest. "Energy emissions of machinery, high concentration of life-form readings, all at a low level of activity."

"Let's go." It was difficult to walk briskly through the gentle landscape, but with a conscious effort Kirk quick-timed the party to a stand of slender, birch-like trees at the edge of the city. The buildings, like the plant life, were mostly gray with pale gold detail, simple and small, but finely made. Kirk wondered if the people were gray and gold and sleepy, too.

As if on cue, McCoy's voice at his shoulder reported, "Basically humanoid readings, Jim. The energy readings are low but regular, and they don't seem to be caused by somnolence or disease; but it can't be their natural state. If it were, they could never have built or cultivated anything." The tricorder beeped and buzzed as he made adjustments and grunted. "Something else odd. Are you sure the entire crew of that freighter returned with their ship?"

"According to the orders from Starfleet, yes, Doctor." Only Spock could have made the reply with no trace of distrust.

"Well, if this thing's functioning properly, we won't have to worry about the citizens' reaction to off-worlders. There's one in the city right now."

"You're sure, Bones?"

It was a touchy matter to question McCoy's medical analyses, but he only shrugged. "Compared to these creatures' readings, even one normal human life form stands out like an ulcerated thumb."

"Can you pinpoint the human?"

"When we get closer, sure."

"Well, it looks like all we have to do is go in and ask."

The streets were comfortably wide, and though not bustling, were far from deserted. The inhabitants were small, slender and wide-eyed as children, but they moved with a grace and dignity that suggested maturity and high intelligence. They greeted the men of the *Enterprise* with delighted and curious smiles, and indicated that they should continue further into the city. They trailed along behind the three, murmuring quietly among themselves. Kirk, who had not been in a parade since his days as a cadet, was faintly embarrassed to find himself leading one now.

The city was large, but laid out along practical lines. The street led directly into the central square like a spoke to the hub of a wheel. There, after some confusion, they were greeted in good Standard English by a half-dozen obviously important citizens.

"Welcome, Terrans, to Jallipye, capital of our world, Jellicle." Uhura's approximation had been exact. "I am Ampor, who bears the great honor of being your host. We are delighted to see that you have found your way to us, although it had been hinted that you would soon arrive. Are you hungry? We have more than enough food."

The quality of the Jellican's English indicated that the *Henry's* influence had been extensive. Kirk didn't want to compound it, but there was no point in ignoring it.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Jellicans. Like our friends before us, we have found our way to you from a distant place in the hope of friendship, and to learn more of your world. I am called Kirk" Unable to imitate Ampor's elegant turn of phrase, he smiled and bowed slightly. "And these are my honored friends Spock and McCoy"

The officers also bowed in turn, and Kirk wondered how to proceed without giving offense or unnecessary information. But the Jellicans seemed pleased with the introduction, and were mulling it over among themselves, content to stand about the square until the exchange was satisfactorily digested. He took advantage of the lull to confer with his officers.

"Well, Bones?"

"They all *seem* to be perfectly healthy, Jim, although the readings say they should be almost comatose. Strange metabolism. I'd like to examine one of them to find the cause of that shadowing around their eyes."

"Spock?"

"Nothing extraordinary, Captain. However, there are small inconsistencies. The buildings register as quite ancient, the machinery as relatively new, developed to its present level over a comparatively short time; approximately five Earth centuries. Yet it has remained at this level for three more, with no signs of advancement."

Kirk noted the observation for future reference. He had brought the two most perceptive specialists in the crew with him in order to determine the existence of any problem as quickly as possible. But the immediate problem seemed to be their own, not the Jellicles'. Why had they been sent here?

"Supper, Bones. We'll have it here, not on board. We're going to have to step carefully to determine the extent of the *Henry's* interference. Speaking of interference, where's that ulcerated human?"

"Ulcerated, Captain?"

The voice was clear and precise, and coming from just behind his left shoulder. She might have been there for some time--he would not have noticed her until she spoke, for she was dressed in pale shadings of gray like the Jellicans.

"An obscure reference, Ma'am." He turned and smiled smoothly, controlling the impulse to demand an immediate explanation of her presence and business. "I'm Captain James Kirk of the starship. This is my First Officer, Mr. Spock. And ship's Medical Officer, Doctor Leonard McCoy. We were surprised to pick up human readings. We had assumed that the crew of the *Henry* had returned to Starbase Six."

His smile was not returned. The large brown eyes surveyed the landing party with polite distrust. "They did, sir. I arrived from Starbase Six two weeks ago. A preliminary outline determining the need for further investigation was rather difficult to compile, due to the scattered condition of the records and crew. I am Jael McClullough Apparently the name sounds much like something significant in their culture, since I have been accepted so easily into the community. You must forgive their casual attitude toward your arrival. They probably assumed we were known to each other."

Assumptions, appearances, and guesses . . . The situation was as difficult to grasp as a ball of dandelion fluff. Why hadn't they been informed of the presence of this woman? What was she, and what was she doing here?

The simplest and most logical thing to do was ask. Spock asked. "Doctor McClullough, as I recall, your work with the tribes of Antibes Four, while on assignment to the Plantagenet, resulted in your appointment to the Associates Chair of Sociology at Starfleet Academy. If there is a problem here of a social or anthropological nature, why would Starfleet dispatch a starship when such an expert was stationed in the sector?"

Kirk watched with apprehension as she drew herself to her full height and folded her arms. He knew what her answer would be before she gave it; he had encountered the type many times before.

"I am not 'stationed' anywhere, sir. There are some areas of scientific endeavor that have not yet been appropriated by the military. I am here as a representative of the Institute for Racial Integrity, in whose opinion the situation of the Jellicles is particularly significant." Her gaze flickered briefly to Kirk. "As to the rationale of Starfleet, Mr. Spock, it has always been beyond me. And as to the existence of a problem here, as yet I have been unable to gather sufficient data with which to begin speculation, let alone propose the type of personnel required to effect a solution."

The tone was frosty, but underscored with too much honest frustration to be actually rude. It was certain that the Jellicans did not pick up their graceful turn of phrase from her. Spock blinked once and turned to Kirk's sympathetic smile, his face impassive. It had been quite a while since anyone had addressed him with the crisp formality allegedly preferred by Vulcans. McCoy was trying to swallow his grin.

So she was an expert, with, no doubt, many honors and initials trailing after her name, imposing her presence on this innocuous planet in the interests of academic research. Spock did not seem surprised that she was here without a team of assistants, which spoke very highly of her professional standing. But, judging from the diffidence with which she greeted them, her attempts at investigation had not met much success.

Kirk's smile became rather grim. He wondered if she knew that, under Federation laws governing the investigation of unclassified worlds, she was now under his authority. He was not in the habit of appropriating stray civilians for Starfleet business, but her expertise might be useful. Even if Kirk's only recommendation to Starfleet was that they keep their noses out of the planet's affairs, he would want reputable testimony to support it.

The Jellicans had fallen silent and were standing at a distance, watching intently as if the four visitors were the most fascinating creatures they had ever seen. Yet their stares were not rude, their patience seemed infinite, and their manners impeccable.

"Sir Kirk," Ampor ventured, "may we provide anything more? Would you wish to sleep, to eat, or to play? There is food, and you will find McClullough's house comfortable and private. Is there something else we may give you for your pleasure?"

The offer was rather overwhelming. Kirk's inbred curiosity rose sharply, overriding all command concerns. "Jellicans, your hospitality does us more honor than we can express. More than anything else, though, we wish to speak with you all, and learn more of your world."

They were flattered. "Then we shall do everything!" The Jellican raised both graceful hands above his head, there was a general murmur of pleasure, and the entire visible population moved forward to begin a tour of the city.

Kirk excused himself and opened his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"Sulu here, sir."

"Mr. Sulu, it seems we'll be staying with these people for a while. The situation is a bit, ah, nebulous, but all's quiet. Your status?"

"All quiet with the ship, sir. Maintaining standard orbit. But we're starting to pick up some new readings on the peripheral trackers. Too far out for full scanning, but it's approaching at space normal speed. Most likely a comet, sir."

"Is it headed in?"

"Yes, sir."

A muscle twitched at the corner of Kirk's eye. Rubbing it absently, he glanced at the polite faces turned toward him. "Put a long range scan on it, Mr. Sulu. I want the analysis as soon as you have it. Kirk out."

The four Federation representatives became conscientious tourists.

After an impressive and enjoyable afternoon, Ampor led them to the small, lovely structure that was to be their quarters.

"Food will be brought, and tonight we will play. Until dark, then." He nodded graciously and walked back toward the central square.

Away from the congenial company, Kirk's irritation could be expressed. "As far as I can see, the people are cooperative, cheerful, highly intelligent, and remarkably unspoiled. Their planet, from all readings, is stable, fertile, contains no deposits of any rare minerals, and is of no particular navigational importance. In short, what the hell are we doing here?"

"Given such an analysis, Captain, it is reasonable to assume that the Federation would wish to establish diplomatic relations with the Jellicans." Spock could not show irritation, but his speech had the hesitancy of a man who suspects he is the victim of a practical joke.

"But beyond first contact, and excepting critical conditions, starships are not dispatched for that purpose."

"True, Captain. Therefore, the only logical assumption . . ."

"Is that Starfleet Command either doesn't have any idea of what it's doing . . ." Kirk muttered tightly, voicing a suspicion he had entertained on more than one occasion, ". . . or they know something we don't."

He didn't notice the annoyed glance Dr. McClullough spared him as she turned away from the *Enterprise* party, and only McCoy heard her muttered comment, "The former rather than the latter, I would think."

The meal which was brought consisted mostly of vegetable dishes, spicy and sweet. There was more than enough food.

"There's no doubting their hospitality, but I wonder why we were not invited to dine with them," Dr. McClullough observed. "I have taken my meals alone since I arrived, although I have always been accompanied whenever I've travelled about the city. But I would have thought that your presence would have prompted a formal dinner, since they have invited you to 'play' with them this evening."

"They have not offered these things to you, Doctor McClullough?" Spock asked.

She straightened, and spoke with slow precision, as though to a child. "It has been my experience,

Mr. Spock, that one alien among a people is not usually regarded as having any real difference, since there is no evidence of one's culture to reinforce it. As an exo-anthropologist, I have found it to be a mixed blessing. One alien is to be tolerated, indulged, and watched over, like a pet. Four aliens are an embassy, not an isolated curiosity."

The edge of bitterness was barely noticeable; and it was, of course, impossible to tell if Spock took the observation personally. He said only, "Very astute, Doctor."

It was McCoy who changed the subject. "Then you don't know what they mean by 'play', Doctor?"

She turned her full attention on him. If she was going to give Bones a dose of her abrasive intellect, Kirk was ready to quote chapter and verse of Federation law to her and order her to stop showing off.

He needn't have worried; with women, McCoy could take care of himself. Her face softened in response to the doctor's quizzical smile, and her tone was warm. "Our conversations are likely to be very awkward with us calling each other 'Doctor' back and forth. I am Jael." The edge returned to her voice. "I have not seen the Jellicles play. Nor have I seen any one of them eat."

Kirk considered the observation. "Bones, could the low metabolism readings be due to the possibility that they're not eating?"

"No, the readings are lower than could be accounted for by that alone."

"Even given such a possibility, Captain," the cool abruptness of Spock's tone dismissed the idea, "there is no logical reason for self-imposed starvation."

"Logic, Mr. Spock, seems to be the last consideration in this situation." Kirk's deepening curiosity brought with it an indefinite patience. "The only practical course of action is further observation. I suggest we prepare ourselves for the evening's activities."

Even though daylight still lingered in the sky as they walked with Ampor to the meeting hall, the streets of Jallipye were so brilliantly illuminated that they seemed an active retaliation against the approaching darkness. The wide square and the great pavillion blazed with torches that looked like incandescent cat-tails. Kirk wondered if it was only his imagination that made the Jellicles seem actually afraid to look up at the night sky. Not that there was much to see. Jellicle had no moon, and the stars visible from this lonely planet were few and faint. After a day of blindingly bright sun, perhaps such an empty sky would seem frightening by contrast.

The Jellicles had donned black for the evening, heightening the gray shadowing about their eyes, and making them look surprisingly formal. Their manner, however, was casual and festive, and their warm hospitality was irresistible. Ampor and Prani, his exquisite female companion, introduced them graciously to other members of the community and left them free to move about at will.

There was no apparent organization to the gathering, the play was spontaneous and whimsical. There were games, riddles, songs and dancing. The rooms of the spacious hall were filled with the gentle sounds of conversation and song. The festivities at which Kirk had hoped to learn more of these people appeared to be no more than a quiet evening with friends.

Bones and Dr. McClullough seemed to be establishing the most promising contact. They were together, at the center of a group of admirers, who were teaching them an intricate reel dance and the song that went with it. There was much soft laughter and hand-holding. Kirk hoped that it would prove as enlightening as it was enjoyable.

Kirk wandered among the unoccupied Jellicles, greeting their smiles and answering their questions, hoping to obtain some answers to his own. Despite their cordiality, there was an inbred dignity about these people that he did not wish to offend. He was able to gather that they had no sense of competition or class privilege, that nationalism and politics, formalized religion, and warfare were known to them from their past history, but no longer existed. The only response to his references to disease and environmental hostility were polite, empty smiles, as though such hardships were totally unknown.

Yet the Jellicles had not sunk into complacency with this comfortable world. They were serene rather than smug; and within the gently inflexible restrictions of formality, their curiosity and imagination responded instantly to the possibilities suggested in Kirk's conversation. They seemed the perfect masters of a perfect world; and Kirk willed himself to dismiss the vague intuition that there was another, deeper element of the culture that he could not discern.

If the Jellicles did not eat, they did drink. Kirk noticed that a number of the older citizens had entered bearing ornate trays, and were passing silently among the others, serving small glasses of amber liquid. All accepted them. McCoy had already tasted his when Spock appeared at the Doctor's side and spoke quickly before moving to the Captain as Kirk raised his glass.

"Captain, readings of the liquor being served show that, while the alcohol content is not excessive, the fundamental ingredient is a plant which roughly approximates the Earth form of Belladonna. It could be quite deleterious, even lethal, to humans."

Kirk looked down at the glass in his hand. "Bones drank some. Will he be all right?"

"The Doctor drank only a small amount before I spoke to him. However, it would be advisable that he eat again and delay sleeping for some hours."

Kirk kept the glass in his hand, like a non-drinker at a cocktail party, so as not to appear rude. McCoy would know better than anyone if he was suffering any reaction to the liquor, but Kirk watched him from across the room for several minutes, until his attention was caught by the change the drink seemed to effect in the Jellicans.

The glasses had been accepted with surprise and a deeply ceremonial formality, almost a sadness. The individual groups grew quiet and dispersed, the people moved about silently, drinking deeply, not looking at each other. In contrast to the earlier gaiety, the silence was deafening. The four visitors were forgotten. Instinctively, Kirk moved to a vantage point by the wall and waited.

The first pulse of music passed through the hall like a sigh. Then an inhalation, an acceptance, and a soft murmuring sound rose from the uplifted faces of the Jellicles. The song had no words, yet it reached them all, compelling, irresistible, rising from a murmur to a chorus. It was a ballad, a dirge, an anthem, a lullaby, a great and growing hymn of celebration. Kirk felt his pulse quicken. He had been seeking a definition of this world; it was here, conveyed more directly than any words or analysis. All of what was Jellicle: hopes, dreams, achievements, ambitions, loves and fears, rising and swirling against the bright windows like light-shot wine raised in an audacious toast. He felt a great shout of laughter growing under his ribs. And yet, and yet, beneath the glory was a keening drag at the heart, a sense of loss, of finality.

When it seemed that the intensity of the music could no longer be sustained, the dance began. It bore no resemblance to the simple reels and minuets seen earlier. Elegant, elaborate and demanding, it swept the Jellicles through the hall. Singly and in pairs, the black figures whirled under the brilliant lights. Hand to hand, turning, spinning, the Jellicles abandoned themselves to the music. There was no formal design to the dance; individual expressions of celebration were infinitely varied. On and on they danced, time and place forgotten, into themselves, into the night.

Kirk stood on the edge of the dance as though on the shore of some vast, changeable sea, feeling the substance beneath his feet being sucked away by the undertow. Spock was also immobilized, staring before him in hypnotic fascination. From the center of the maelstrom, McCoy and Jael were struggling toward them like half-drowned victims of a riptide. Finally they were together, four aliens islanded in the flood of the music of Jellicle.

Spock remained silent, his concentration a palpable thing, attempting to comprehend and leash the storm. It would be futile. McCoy's face at his side, pale and wide-eyed, and Jael clinging to his arm, decided Kirk. It was not a question of manners, it was a question of sanity. They had to get out.

Moving gingerly through the spinning eddies of the dance, they reached the doors without being injured or noticed. However impassioned the Jellicles seemed in their trancelike waltz, they swirled and circled around Kirk and the others with scrupulous care. The street outside the hall was bright and silent. The city beyond stood empty.

By the time they reached their quarters, McCoy was squinting tightly against the glare of the cat-tails. Jael moved to cover most of the torches and to rehear some of their evening meal, talking constantly, pointlessly, to maintain his attention. The doctor injected himself with a mild stimulant and joined her in the inner room.

Conversation did not come easily to Kirk. He flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Mr. Scott, how's our visitor?"

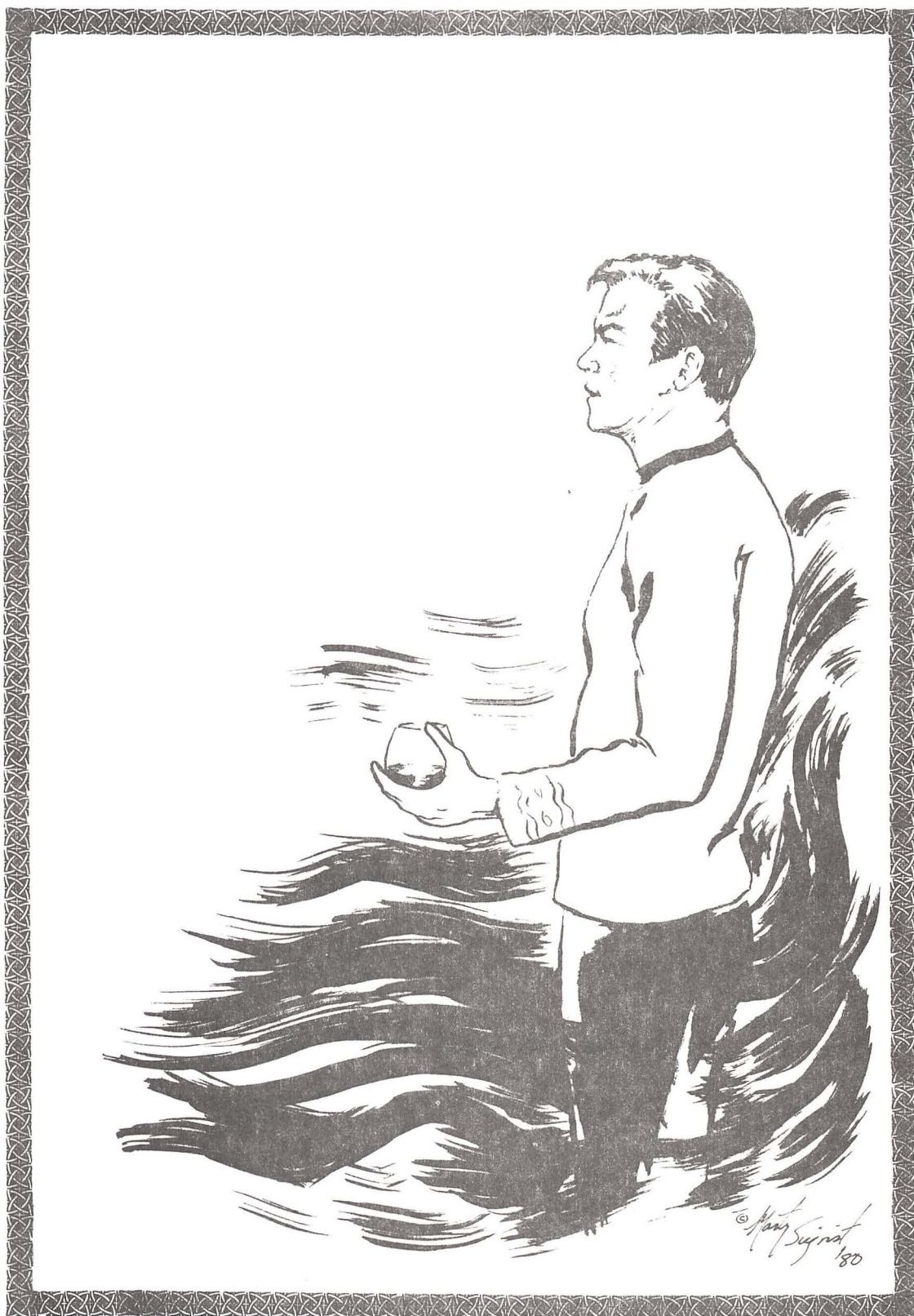
As always, Scott wasted no time with formalities. "Definitely a large comet, Captain. That's about all we can get on it right now. No problems with the ship, sir."

Something neither military nor scientific inside Kirk took comfort in the disciplined accents of Scotland. "Keep it that way, Scotty." His gaze fixed on the bright, empty street outside the open door. "Do you read anything unusual on the planet?"

"Lieutenant Uhura reports their communications system silent. No apparent reason."

"Is it?" Kirk murmured.

"What was that, sir?"



Kirk realized he had spoken the question aloud. "Nothing, Scotty. Contact me as soon as you have more data on the comet. Kirk out."

He studied the thoughtful face of his First Officer. "Mr. Spock, does this evening's entertainment correspond to anything known of other cultures?"

"The significance of dance varies from culture to culture, Captain, from the purely esthetic, to the socially ritualistic, to the deeply mystical, as in certain aboriginal tribes. However, there is no record of any such behavior encompassing the population of an entire city . . ." His words were carefully noncommittal.

So the song of the Jellicles had reached the Vulcan, too. On Spock's home planet only children danced, and then only to perfect their coordination. But something in the music had transcended cultural barriers.

Jael and McCoy reappeared with coffee and a spicy pudding. "I feel safe in assuming," she ventured, "that this is not something they indulge in regularly, Captain. There have been no large gatherings in the time since I arrived."

Kirk noted, with something like personal satisfaction, that the woman's stiff professionalism had yielded somewhat in response to the dance of the Jellicles, or perhaps to McCoy's sudden vulnerability. She sat close to McCoy's side, serving him like a well-trained servant, but her eyes were dark and deeply troubled.

"Was it done in our honor, then, as you suggested?"

"The gathering, yes, but the dance, no. They seemed to have no control over it," she said tonelessly.

"Was it induced by the drink?"

"No, Jim." McCoy looked up from his coffee. His eyes still seemed entirely too large, but his color had improved. "This liquor is a strong depressant, a soporific. It wouldn't stimulate anyone to dancing."

"Is it an hallucinogen?"

McCoy looked carefully at him. "You mean does it make you see things that aren't there?" He turned and smiled suddenly at Jael, who, surprisingly, smiled back. "No, I don't think so."

"What, then? You are of the opinion that the dance was not spontaneous, but that it was not prompted by our presence, or by the drink." Kirk didn't like where his speculation was leading him. "Mass hypnosis?"

"No hypnotic effects discovered to date would produce mass behavior that would also allow such individual diversity, Captain," Spock said. The flatness of his tone made Kirk look at him sharply. There was something more the Vulcan wanted to say, but could not. Something that a Vulcan could not volunteer to an outsider. Spock looked up at his captain and friend, and Kirk read the unspoken thought.

Racial compulsion.

Salmon, swallows, and Vulcans. An inherited drive that went deeper than reason, that ignored circumstance. It could be beautiful, majestic, awesome; and, in the case of Vulcans, deadly. Kirk did not want to dwell on the finality of such an alternative.

"We won't be able to put this into perspective until we can see what aftereffects it has, if any. I suggest we get some sleep. Bones, you can stand first watch. Walk around, get some fresh air. Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine, Jim." McCoy blinked owlishly and grinned. If he wasn't all right, it wouldn't be for lack of care. Jael had gone to fetch more coffee, apparently fully prepared to stand his watch and her own.

"Three watches, Bones. Wake me in two hours." Kirk smiled faintly, wondering if the puzzle of Jellicle would trouble McCoy and his associate the way it would dominate his own dreams.

"What sort of man is James Kirk?"

McCoy's chin lifted sharply and he reached for his cup, trying to dismiss the grotesque fantasies that had crowded into his mind during the long silence. Jael was slowly pacing the length of the room, her manner subdued and thoughtful. The question was not an attempt at light conversation.

Perhaps it was the quiet intensity of the question, perhaps the combination of drugs in his system, but McCoy was surprised to find himself carefully considering his answer. Describe a man like James Kirk in fifty words or less. The toughness, the gentleness, the strength and power that had nothing to do with his position, the joy, the love. Despite his many accreditations in psychology and his years in the service, McCoy's feelings for his captain were not founded in professional or scientific terms. He wondered how

Spock, who was even more reserved than he about personal matters, would respond to such a question.

"James Kirk is personally responsible for the lives of four hundred and thirty-four crew members," he said slowly, "and he is one of the twelve men in the Federation entrusted with contacting new cultures, maintaining the integrity and safety of Federation space, and making independent decisions that could affect the course of our own and alien civilizations. He is worthy of that trust."

"But what sort of man is he?" She turned to face him, and her voice held an edge that was almost eagerness, as though she had already reached a conclusion, but was anxious for his confirmation.

McCoy was more puzzled than flattered by the change in her attitude. "Do you really think you should be guided by my opinion? I am an officer under his command, you know."

Her impatience flared at his caution. "Doctor McCoy, I was with you tonight at the gathering, if you'll recall. I had ample opportunity to observe you with the Jellicans, and I am capable of recognizing quality when I see it. Your concern for life is as reliable as. . ."

"As a civilian's?"

"Yes!" she snapped, then sighed apologetically. "I value your opinion, McCoy."

"If it's so easy for you to identify quality through observation, you don't need my opinion." McCoy rose and crossed to stand before her, and when he spoke his voice was very quiet. "But I'll give you the benefit of my experience. I have trusted James Kirk with my life, my sanity, and maybe even my immortal soul, many times. I would not hesitate to give my life for him. But more than that--I would trust the lives, and the happiness, of those I love to him."

She stood silent for a moment, then nodded slightly. "Thank you." She was a very nice-looking woman, and the coffee was sweet on her breath. He smiled down at her and said, "You're welcome."

"McCoy, would you come with me now?"

"Where?"

She hesitated, looking toward the open door. "During the gathering tonight, just before the . . . dance . . . I managed to learn why my name sounds so familiar to the Jellicles. There is a place called Clullow a few kilometers from here. A sort of library or archive, very ancient. We could learn a great deal more about the planet there than the natives would be able to tell us."

"And you want me to go there with you now?" McCoy reflected that if the invitation was a proposition, it was the most elaborate one he'd received in quite a while. "Why not wait 'til morning?"

She was selecting equipment from the pack she had brought from the inner room when she'd gone for more coffee. "I don't think we can afford to wait 'til morning," she murmured, half to herself. "I'll be back in two days at most. James Kirk will give me the time. I'll let you know as soon as I find anything important."

"Like hell!" McCoy crossed the room in three strides, seized her with a firm grip on elbow and shoulder, and steered her toward the opposite door. At her shocked resistance, his voice rose angrily. "This is a research mission, Missy, not an archeological picnic! And the first thing you do with any information is report it!" Suddenly mindful of her dignity, he transferred his grip to her wrist and opened the inner door. "Jim!"

The sound of McCoy's raised voice had already awakened Kirk from gray and golden dreams written by Poe and orchestrated by Ravel. He sat on the edge of the too-soft bed, trying to massage the images and sounds from his memory, when the door opened. "What is it, Bones?" he said groggily.

McCoy moved toward him, his face worried. All traces of the drug had vanished. "Are you all right?"

Kirk smiled and shook his head. "Bad dreams . . ." he murmured. "What's the problem?"

"Dr. McClullough has discovered new information."

Kirk did not comment on her sense of timing or the belligerent set of McCoy's mouth. Spock, who probably had not slept at all, moved to stand quietly at his side, his face set in an expression of patient inquiry. Kirk wondered briefly if his First Officer was ever troubled by bad dreams. "Yes, Dr. McClullough?"

"Captain Kirk, the significance of the information is hardly verifiable at this time--"

"But interesting enough for you to want to investigate it in the middle of the night, all by yourself," McCoy growled.

Her face tightened, but her voice remained level. "Simple regard for proper scientific method . . ."

"Doctors," Kirk said gently, "I am not accustomed to being awakened to referee family fights. Nor do I deliver lectures on responsibility to adults. Dr. McClullough?"

Her gaze fixed on the patterned rug beneath his feet, she recounted her conversation with McCoy. Kirk had no doubt that the report was totally accurate, but her voice was threaded with a tension that was not embarrassment or apology.

Neither Spock nor McCoy interrupted her report or the edged silence that followed it. Kirk found himself scowling intently, as his fingers traced the line of braid on the gold tunic folded over the bedpost. Then with an abrupt sigh he straightened and, stepping over his discarded boots, crossed to stand before her, and carefully enumerated the objections she had attempted to avoid. "We do not know how long such an investigation would take; and there is no logical reason to expect that a study of the Jellicles' history would help us in determining if they have been harmed by their recent contact with off-worlders."

He was close enough to read her eyes, and he grasped her arm so that she could not look away from him. "Then why, Jael? Why is it so important to see Clullow right now? What are you afraid of, Doctor?"

Her breath caught; she seemed almost to wince at the word. Then Kirk felt the tension leave her shoulders, and her eyes met his with no trace of pride or distrust. "I don't know . . . I don't know. A feeling. A hunch. A desperate, morbid premonition . . . Something is drastically wrong here, and something is going to happen very soon . . . The Jellicans cannot or will not help us to learn more about them. We have to obtain any information we can, as quickly as possible. We have to help them . . ."

"That's supposed to be what we're here for, Doctor," Kirk said simply. He hoped his smile was as reassuring as it was satisfied. So much for academic jealousy. She managed a faint smile, and he released her arm.

As he crossed to his communicator, Kirk noted the quiet approval in McCoy's eyes; but the sharp speculation in Spock's face recalled to him the troubled images of his dreams, and the feeling that his sense of apprehension was more than imaginary.

Kirk opened his communicator and reached for his tunic. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Mr. Scott, do the surface scanners show any readings of a building or complex within a few kilometers of the city?"

Scott's voice was puzzled but matter-of-fact. "There's been nothing in the long-range scan, Captain. How narrow do ye want the focus, sir?"

"A radius of fifty kilometers. Full intensity."

"Aye, sir." There was a pause, during which Kirk pulled on his shirt and boots. McCoy had moved to Jael's side, but her attention was fixed on the communicator lying open on the bed. Kirk reached for it as Scott's voice apologized for the delay.

"There's something about twenty kilometers from the city that could be a building, Captain. Or it could be a natural rock formation. There's plenty of space inside it, and it's complex enough; but it could be a series of caves or tunnels." Scott sounded dissatisfied. "We can't get enough readings to distinguish it from the hills around it, sir. If it's manmade, it's verra, verra old."

"It's a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Scott." Although there was no logical reason to be, Kirk felt sharply encouraged by the report, and nodded to Jael and McCoy. "Select transporter coordinates about half a kilometer outside the center of the site, Scotty. Dr. McCoy and Dr. McClullough will beam up in two minutes. Give them each a homing implant before they leave. Kirk out."

Kirk sensed the reflexive impulse that his First Officer instantly controlled. He wanted Spock here with him for the work he planned, and McCoy could be relied on to keep Dr. McClullough's concern within practical limits. Jael and McCoy were already in the other room, gathering their equipment. Kirk smiled in answer to Dr. McClullough's silent message of gratitude and determination, then looked at McCoy. "Keep in touch, Bones."

McCoy swallowed the last of his cold coffee and nodded easily. "Yes, sir. You too, Jim."

When the hum of the transporter had faded, Kirk opened his communicator and responded to the preoccupation he'd noticed in his Engineer's voice. "Any more data on that comet, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, sir," Scott answered instantly. "Mr. Chekov extrapolates its course as a sling-shot intersecting with the T-37 system, looping Jellicle's sun every ten thousand years. It started to grow its tail four hours ago. It should become visible from the planet in approximately twenty-four hours, and it'll skim the atmosphere."

"That's mighty close, Scotty. Any danger to the planet?"

"No radiation detected so far, sir. But the thing will play hell with their communications. We expect a full white-out of all sensors and communications in twelve hours."

"I want a full-spectrum analysis of the comet on every frequency we have, Mr. Scott. Have Mr. Chekov pull the tapes on the T-37 system. I want to know where it's been. Keep tracking Dr. McCoy. Kirk out."

Kirk frowned and turned to his First Officer. "Well, Mr. Spock, it seems that if we weren't sure of a problem before, we are now. Any theories?"

"On the comet, Captain, or on the doctors' excursion?" The dryness of his tone might have made Kirk suspect he was being sarcastic, but his thoughts were clearly occupied with the new problem.

"The effects of such a phenomenon on a culture which seems to show so little interest in celestial activities may be quite disruptive. In ancient societies such an appearance was usually interpreted as an omen of impending disaster. It will be interesting to observe the reactions of the Jellicans when the comet becomes visible."

"In your opinion, would they connect the comet's appearance with our arrival?"

"They do not seem to be strongly superstitious, Captain. I would anticipate more a reaction of total confusion."

"I'll keep that in mind, Mr. Spock. For the present, however, I am still keenly interested in their social traditions. I want to see if they are still dancing."

The depth of Spock's curiosity could be measured by the directness of his reply. "Indeed, Captain."

The tide of music pulled at them long before they were in sight of the hall. The dance had lost none of its intensity, nor had it degenerated into individual orgies, as might have been expected. Kirk had seen too many instances of unbridled gaiety dissolve into the most perverted forms of civilized barbarity. The pageant continued as majestic as before, but now Kirk felt that he could sense a deeper sadness. The dancers were exhausted, the sweeping tapestry subtly fraying at the edges, the clarity of the figures blurring before his eyes. The powerful music of Jellicle seemed to be consuming them.

The nightmarish aspect of the scene penetrated deeper into Kirk's imagination. *La Valse, The Masque of the Red Death*, a fairy tale about a girl with red shoes, something sinister that he could not define . . . Once again, in response to an instinct of self-preservation, he moved back into the city until the music faded.

"And in the morning, the Princess' slippers were worn and broken . . ." he murmured. Then, the hypnotic spell of the music broken, "Readings, Spock. With the city empty, we can investigate those inconsistencies you noticed."

McCoy and Dr. McClullough materialized at the foot of a long valley that sloped toward a massive range of hills. Mists exhaled by the warm earth lifted from the mosslike grass, and the stars shown pale and distant; but McCoy did not need the analysis of his tricorder to know that the indefinite shadow at the base of the hills was a vast complex of buildings.

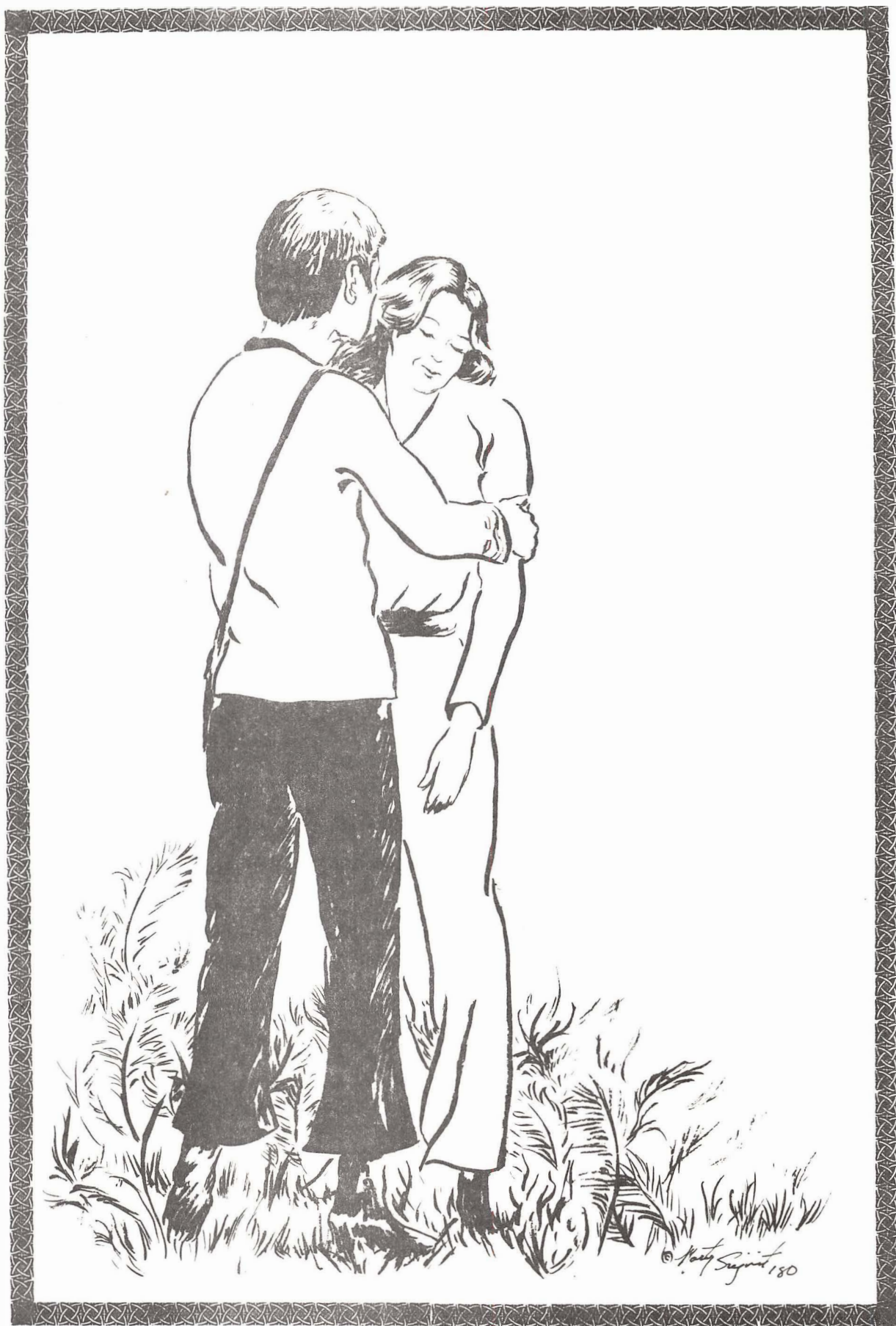
McCoy inhaled deeply with satisfaction. Scott's calculations had been precise, and the transfer had gone as efficiently as he'd known it would, although Jael had submitted to the insertion of the transponder with stiff resentment. McCoy noticed that she was still rubbing her arm as she stood frowning into the darkness. "It would seem that the military comes in handy from time to time," he commented with ill-concealed smugness.

"Despite indications to the contrary," she muttered absently, "I've always suspected that Starfleet harbored an element of competence. It seems concentrated particularly in the captain and crew of the *Enterprise*." She switched on the small track-light and started down the grassy slope. "That's why I sent for him. And you."

The casual sarcasm of the remark propelled him after her. He caught her shoulders in a firm, impersonal grip and spun her around to face him. "You sent for the *Enterprise*?"

She seemed surprised at the determination in his face, and shrugged gently. "Well, not exactly. I sent a priority request through Contact to Starfleet Command for a ship qualified to deal with a delicate, vital, and potentially dangerous situation. They sent the *Enterprise*."

McCoy stiffened. "With no regard for the importance of the mission we might have been on," he said quietly. "Without consideration for anything but your own pet theories. I admit that you're a very impressive lady, Dr. McClullough, and you seem to have acquired a lot of influence. But I wonder if you've earned it. I can't help but think that you'd benefit greatly from a hitch in Starfleet yourself. It might teach you to use that power with some sense of responsibility--"



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He stopped short, startled that his restraint could be so easily shaken, and realized that she was laughing. "I know . . . I know . . . You're absolutely right, you know--it's an attitude that's given me trouble all my life. But the fact remains that I have always been right." She reached up to cradle his face. "You, Doctor McCoy, are a very difficult man, and I like you better than anyone I've met in the past five years. You'll find you can rely on me . . . the same way I've come to rely on you."

There is something distinctly enjoyable about kissing a smiling woman, McCoy reflected, as he did so; and found the sentiment warmly reciprocated. The memory of the harsh words was gently erased, as the mists drifted and clung about their knees and the stars faded with the first hint of dawn.

"Fine way to conduct a research expedition," McCoy murmured indulgently.

She grinned. "The most effective form of communication I know. Consider it a heartfelt apology for my previous transgressions . . . among other things. Just so long as you know that we're both on the same side."

"I'd just like to find out what you think we're on the same side against."

The lines of concern showed clearly about her mouth and eyes. "So would I."

They continued toward the sprawling shadow. McCoy speculated idly about the sort of woman who could send a hunch through Federation channels and get a starship. Then Jael triggered the portable floodlight, and his imagination was caught and held by the complex of buildings before them.

The immediate impression was of an ancient, timeless dignity. Although the moss-grass and flowering vines had claimed the spires and sloping roofs, folding over its outlines like a living cloak, no rot or erosion marred the fine, elegant architecture, the delicate mosaics, or the high, graceful windows. McCoy was reminded of the monasteries of Vulcan, where thought and dedication hung in the air as thick as honey, and a game of chess could be contemplated from one generation to the next. Cathedral, college, library, museum, the key to the puzzle of Jellicle was here.

They entered in silence, their footsteps echoing along the corridors. "Deserted," McCoy whispered reverently, although they'd known that it would be. But as they moved through the maze of hallways, past libraries, laboratories and studios, it became apparent that the abandonment had been orderly and purposeful and planned far in advance. Every tool and scrap of material was neatly stored, every piece of film and tap, every book and picture, enclosed in airtight containers.

It was a fortress of and against time, the sum total of a civilization held in suspension, like a flower sealed in amber. There seemed to be no evidence of a reference or dating system, so they proceeded without plan, feeling slightly ashamed that their ignorance should give them an excuse to wander among such rich and varied beauty. McCoy was hardly aware of the passage of time, and was startled, when they entered a room fronting the outer wall, to see full daylight slanting through the windows.

In silent agreement they turned away from the sunlit rooms, toward the interior of the complex. As they moved inward from room to room, they seemed to travel back through Jellicle's history. In each succeeding chamber the architecture and artifacts revealed in the harsh glare of their worklamps became simpler, rougher, more primitive. Yet in even the most basic tools and utensils there showed that spark of imagination and striving that had reached such eloquent expression in the works displayed in the outer galleries.

When it seemed that they had traced their way back to the relics of the beginnings of Jellican culture, Jael turned abruptly away from the ordered exhibit, toward a door almost hidden by the sloping wall. McCoy followed her through the narrow passage, and emerged into a high, vaulted corridor. With a slow, almost dreamlike determination, Jael pursued the course of the hall; but McCoy lifted the light above his head and studied the stark, gleaming walls and the shadowed reaches of the ceiling. He judged that the corridor must run through the very heart of the complex, but, unlike the rooms around it, there was nothing primitive in the chilling severity of its design. The walls rose close around him, blank, featureless, forbidding; and McCoy knew, with instinctive certainty, that this hall was far older than the surrounding structures, that it was witness and memorial to some absolute element of the Jellicles' existence, yet that it had never sheltered any aspect of life.

The beam of light trembled slightly, and McCoy realized that he was shivering. Awkwardly he reslung the lamp at his shoulder, and was almost relieved to hear Jael's voice calling him. He followed the sound, and found her standing before a huge door at the far end of the corridor. The only device on the massive stone was the deeply carved image of a blazing, bearded star. Together they pushed open the door, and faced the final, unassailable answer to the riddle of Jellicle.

McCoy could find no words. Beside him, Jael choked on a dry sob, "Oh, no . . . oh, no . . . Oh, my God"

As daylight filtered through the streets of Jallipye, Kirk stood at the door of Jael's house and watched the dancers drift slowly back through the main square. They looked dazed, pale, the masklike markings of their faces darker by contrast. He did not go into the street to question them; the answers to the enigma of Jellicle were more likely to be found here.

Spock sat unmoving before his tricorder at the table, as though pure concentration could speed the correlation of the readings taken during the night with the sociological data stored in the computers of the *Enterprise*. The reply they awaited would be in the form of a probability factor regarding the cause of the problem, and, hopefully, a recommendation of policy to be taken to effect a solution. The problem itself was painfully clear.

Stagnation. The evidence, as they explored the city without the selective benefit of a guide, had been obvious and ample. Under the blazing cattails, while the rest of the city danced, he and Spock had moved freely through desolate schools, abandoned factories and empty homes. Power, communications, water supply and transportation systems operated as efficiently as the ship's scanners had indicated, but had been neglected for generations, and functioned now only because of the precision of their original design. And there had been other evidence that had more profoundly affected Kirk: rotting books, gardens overgrown with weeds, the absence of children. The food which was so plentiful was merely the unspoiled skimming of storage silos now filled with garbage.

Spock had taken the readings silently, his stiff precision more eloquent than any words. In the rigidly pragmatic echelon of Vulcan morality, waste was perhaps the greatest sin. The order, the peace, the finely designed city and the ordered fields had been a tragic deception, remnants of a once-flourishing civilization that was rapidly, senselessly, crumbling. No cataclysm or war could be blamed for this fall; the Jellicans had simply let their world slip through their fingers. They had devolved, in a few generations, from a race of artists to a race of simpletons.

The rage that boiled inside Kirk at such damnable, monumental negligence drove him from the door to pace through the house. Spock looked up from the tricorder, gazing after the restless figure of his captain. The dark Vulcan eyes regarded Kirk with a profound compassion. Spock doubted that there would be a definitive answer forthcoming; the final decision would be the responsibility of one man. And his duty as Science Officer required that he offer the theory that he had developed from the depths of Vulcan detachment, and that Kirk might reject with his whole being.

But not for the moment. Kirk's pacing was interrupted by the insistent beep of his communicator. "Kirk here."

"Captain." The accents of Scotland were muffled by a pervasive rustling, as of dead leaves. "Sensors and communications are closing down. The comet is growing a tail of ionized crystals that are multiplying geometrically as it approaches the sun. It's an electrochemical reaction with . . ."

"The crystals are composed of frozen gasses the comet picked up in its orbit through T-37, sir," Chekov broke in. "As it approaches this sun the compounds are breaking down and rebonding to form a new element that acts as an ultraviolet prism. Magnetic fields around it are shifting . . ."

Kirk cut through the analysis. "Danger to the ship, Mr. Scott?"

"Nothing we can't weather, Captain. It's just that we'll be deaf and blind in an hour or so."

"Batten down, Scotty. Keep the planet between you and the comet."

Kirk was about to order McCoy and Jael transported to the city when he sensed a growing urgency in his First Officer. Spock had transferred Chekov's transmission to his own communicator, and was correlating the computer's analysis of the comet with the readings taken during the night. His silent intensity commanded Kirk's attention as though the Vulcan had gripped him by the arm. Long ago Kirk had learned to read that quiet face, to interpret the meaning of a gesture, a posture, a turn of the head. Now, the angular figure, poised over the small screen, compelled him to wait for the final analysis.

"Scotty, are you still tracking the doctor's signal?"

"Aye, sir. No word from him, though."

"Keep scanning. Kirk out."

He replaced the communicator at his belt, watching his First Officer at work. He stood very still, and his face showed no sign of impatience. Within a few moments he would have all the facts available through the exhaustive technology of the *Enterprise*, and the considered opinion of the best Science Officer in Starfleet. Whatever those facts might be, they would act upon them for the benefit of the people they had been sent to contact. It was really incredibly simple.

James Kirk was not an obviously religious man. But, like the founders of the Federation, and others who served in it, he possessed a vital scrap of uncluttered insight: that man's deeds survived after him, and that

somehow he was equipped to encompass the enormity of time and space. That knowledge was attainable and infinite, that knowledge shaped and driven by the will to do good would create good. No challenge was unanswerable; no world was a foreign land. James Kirk believed, quite simply, in life. Life bound to life; and the sanctity and triumph of life spanned all stars and echoed through infinity for all time, like the echoes of the song of the Jellicles.

Kirk blinked and smiled faintly to himself, surprised at his solemn turn of mind, glad that Spock could not see his face.

Spock remained unmoving before the blackened screen, his theory confirmed. The comet speeding toward them fulfilled the most ancient prophecies connected with such appearances. Destruction and death. The Greek word for a falling star was catastrophe. And this world's star was falling in on them, as inescapable as certain as doom.

He did not want to voice such morbid visions to the man awaiting his opinion. But the scientific analysis would be as bitter for him to hear. Spock stood, and when he spoke his voice was cold.

"The people are doomed, Captain. There is nothing we can do."

The formality of Spock's manner had warned Kirk of the words before they were spoken, but the shock of their meaning widened his eyes, making him seem very young. "Why?" The question was almost a whisper.

"The simplest description is distortion. The approaching comet contains properties that will produce massive distortion of certain electrochemical impulses, in effect warping the energy output of . . ."

The rustling murmur of movement that had underscored their every thought since dawn had grown in intensity, and was now punctuated with snatches of the song of the night before, sometimes wistful and faint, sometimes almost demented. Now it was overlaid with the definite, familiar hum of a transporter beam. McCoy and Dr. McClullough materialized in the square and made their way toward the house, trying not to look at the restless Jellicans that swayed past them, possessed of a feverish, distracted excitement bordering on hysteria.

McCoy closed the door and leaned against it gratefully. Kirk gave him the time to adjust to the oppressive air of expectancy, to find the words for what he had to say.

"A star, Jim, or a comet, probably. They call it their moon, but of course Jellicle has no moon. It comes every--wait, I figured it out . . . ten thousand years our time. And it destroys them . . ." His voice faltered. Kirk found his own sense of helplessness mirrored in the doctor's face.

McCoy tried again. "It's all there . . . at Clullow. It tells their whole history, almost too far back to estimate. I don't know who maintains it . . ." He fell silent again at the memory of it. Kirk waited, while the song of the Jellicles deepened around them.

"In a high chamber, set apart from the other rooms, there are tapes, and books, and even murals, that tell of the 'moon' that rises in their sky every ten thousand years . . . and of what happens to them." His voice, distant and disbelieving, roughened at the final words. "It brings plague. Inherent, the first symptoms beginning generations before. Lethargy, sterility, hysteria, madness . . . and death."

Jael was standing, silent and unmoving, before the window, her face empty of emotion; but her hand on the sill trembled uncontrollably. In helpless fascination, Kirk moved to stand beside her, and looked out onto the progression of the madness. The Jellicles weaving about the crowded square were chalk white, the markings on their faces and hands now charcoal black, like the way cancer cells showed up in an old x-ray, and expanding, like cancer, eating at their features. The song was constant now, but no longer powerful; and its beauty still pulled at him. McCoy no doubt had tapes of what he had seen at Clullow, but Kirk did not want to see them. Not if Clullow fulfilled, even in part, the promise the music made.

Racial compulsion. Swallows, salmon, Vulcans . . . and lemmings.

No!

McCoy had been convinced on an emotional level, Spock on a scientific basis. But something tenaciously childish or idealistic inside Kirk rejected the idea that intelligent beings could be fated by the whims of the blind stars.

He opened his communicator. The static was everywhere. He turned the dial to the far end of the frequency band. "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

There, faint and thin, was Uhura's voice. "*Enterprise*."

"Status, Lieutenant."

"Scott here, Captain. All secure with the ship, sir. The sensors are givin' us one mash of gibberish, though. I've got all power into the screens; will ye be wantin' to beam up?"

He waited while Kirk questioned his officers. "What danger to the crew if he drops the screens long enough to beam us up?"

"The human brain does not operate on the same electrochemical basis as the Jellicles', Captain. The effect of the comet should be limited to disrupting our sensors and other impulse systems."

McCoy gestured abruptly toward the window. "Some dizziness, maybe a massive headache or two. Nothing like . . . that"

"Is the transporter working, Scotty?"

"Not as it is, but I can tap into the warp engines easy enough. It'll take a few minutes."

"Do it, Scotty. Beam us up."

And once aboard? The question was too vital to be spoken aloud, but Kirk found it reflected in each of the three faces turned toward him.

"Spock, Bones, am I correct in understanding the the comet is the sole cause of the madness?"

"Catalyst would be a more precise definition of its effect, Captain. It is the electrochemical interaction between the field of the comet and the make-up of the Jellican nervous system that causes the madness. At least," he amended, with maddening precision, "that is what I have been able to deduce from the correlation of the readings. Although the exact chemistry of the effect"

McCoy nodded slowly. "There is no other trace of weakness in their physiology. Under normal circumstances, they are strong and resilient and long-lived, and their psychological aptitude seems to indicate the stability required for such strengths"

The memory of what he had seen would not let him continue the dispassionate analysis. "Jim, they could be the very best! What they've created--the beauty, the thought, the skill, the care for everything they touched! They've come so close, again and again. You can see it all there at Clullow, from the beginnings to the height of their civilization, and then the decline as the symptoms of the madness begin. Music, arts, engineering, sciences, theology . . . everything. Except astronomy. That has always been a mystery--a threat.

"And every ten thousand years their 'moon' rises, and they are destroyed as a race. Except for a few scattered groups of survivors. Chance seems to provide that a pathetically small number are not exposed to the effects of the comet. There is no immunity. Life reverts to the primitive, and they begin again."

Kirk spoke, as quietly as an echo of the doctor's thoughts. "We are a race that has always looked up to the stars. Perhaps our knowledge can save them."

As if in response to his words, a wailing cry rose from the square. Spock turned to answer his captain, something like anguish in his anguish in his controlled features, when the door swung open. Ampor stood clinging to the doorway, trying to brace himself against the swirling mob. In belated courtesy he had remembered the visitors he had welcomed to his city only yesterday. He extended his hand. The hand was black, as were the markings on his face. In his eyes there was sorrow and sanity and a glint of sardonic humor. Whether the gesture was one of invitation or apology they never knew. The Jellican gave a long, hopeless cry, as of one falling from a great height, and slipped to the floor at Kirk's feet. The figure was vivid black and white, graceful, and dead. The music in the street beyond surged louder.

Jael cried out and knelt to touch the still figure. Her gesture was frozen in mid-movement as the transporter immobilized them into transparency.

For a full minute after the transporter room solidified around them, the landing party remained frozen by the image of what they had seen. Then Kirk was racing to the bridge, Spock, McCoy and Jael with him. Mr. Scott rose from the command chair as they entered, and Kirk took the seat almost without noticing him. His attention was held by the roiling blight on the viewer screen. The comet was physically repulsive, murky and unstable and glowing with an unhealthy color; and Kirk noticed that his crew was not immune to the effects of its power or appearance.

Spock had taken his station from Mr. Chekov, snapping over relays and clearing banks even before he sat down, waiting for green lights down the fire control board. His responses to Kirk's rapid orders on range, trajectory, speed, and fire power were immediate, and betrayed no hint of the futility he felt. He had not even bothered to enter the question into the battle computer. It would not work. The comet was too close, already slicing into the planet's atmosphere. Not even if they turned the ship into a massive antimatter explosion detonated at the center of the comet's mass, could they now alter its course. For the first time under James Kirk's command, the *Enterprise* had come too late.



The phaser banks were tied in to the master computer, and Scott switched over every spare ounce of power. Spock watched the power of the ship surge to battle status. "Phasers at full power, Captain. Trajectory locked into fire computer."

Spock found himself almost desperately hoping he was wrong, hoping that Kirk, as so often in the past, would prove that will and imagination and gambler's luck could prevail against all logic, could grasp victory beyond the limits of scientific knowledge.

"Fire all phasers, dead center."

"Phasers firing."

The curtness of Kirk's orders was belied by the eloquence in his eyes as he watched the ship's energy drain into the onrushing mass. Minutes stretched by as the glow of the phasers, and the hope in his face, slowly faded.

"All phaser banks discharged. All readings on the comet's course negative," Spock reported, then added, very quietly: "Unchanged."

Kirk might not have heard. His eyes remained fixed on the screen. He knew the time required to recharge completely drained phaser banks. Two hours. Two hours too long. On Jellicle they were already dying. They had come too late. To late

Suddenly the view of the comet was replaced by the image of thickly falling snow. The sensor white-out Scott had predicted. The *Enterprise* hung helplessly above the doomed planet. Kirk had been spared the final minutes' anguish of inaction. His eyes closed. Into the heavy silence of the bridge, his voice asked the next question. "Estimated time of white-out, Mr. Spock?"

"One hour, twenty-seven minutes if we remain in this position, Captain."

Spock's reply stirred another consideration in Kirk's weary mind. It occurred to him that there was no longer any reason for them to remain. He scanned the faces around him. Military, professional faces, that held shock and disbelief tightly controlled as they awaited his orders. His crew, his ship, his responsibility.

He drew a long breath. "Can we move beyond the effect on an extrapolated course?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take us out of here, Mr. Sulu. Lay in a course for Starbase Six."

"Aye, sir."

A semblance of normalcy returned to the bridge. But they knew what had been gambled and lost in the last few minutes, and sleep would not come easily after the change of watch. The officers' lounge would be filled, and there would be brandy provided by McCoy, who knew the complex and painful rituals by which humans relegated sorrow and irretrievable loss to their proper places.

Failure. Its taste was not a familiar thing to James Kirk. It was bitter to swallow, like bile. All the technology and power, all the will and determination at his command, had not been enough. He had failed. Within him, a childish voice cried its helpless protest: *I'm sorry . . . I didn't know. I didn't know . . . I'm so sorry . . . I'm so so sorry . . .* As the heroes had learned in the ancient legends, ignorance of the circumstances was not an acceptable defense against what had been decreed.

He was suddenly eager for the change of watch. He needed to speak with his Vulcan friend, to learn more of the philosophy that could revere and cherish life and accept death without sentimentality, without hypocrisy. He rose from the command chair to cross to Spock's station, and saw that Jael was staring at him.

Her eyes held a look that was both an accusation and a plea. Kirk's thoughts had retreated into considerations of his ship and crew, and he was brutally reminded that it was not his business to seek familiar security. What had McCoy said? A pathetically small handful of survivors that would begin again. Life gives to life, and life is an eternal thing.

"Mr. Scott, estimated time until phaser banks are recharged?"

"One hour, forty-three minutes to full power, sir."

"Put it on priority. Mr. Chekov, how long before the comet clears the planet's atmosphere?"

"Five hours, twenty-six minutes, sir."

"Mr. Sulu, change course to move beyond the comet's effect. We will intercept the comet when it moves beyond the planet."

Sulu's response was immediate. "Aye, aye, sir!"

"Mr. Chekov, compute every possible alternative plan for the destruction of the comet. If we have to vaporize it, detonate it, or hack it to pieces, we are not leaving this system until it is destroyed."

"Yes, sir!"

It was not enough. It could never be enough. Nothing would ever repay the cost of his error. The price that he had always been prepared to pay for his mistakes had been exacted of an entire innocent planet.

The steady assurance of Spock's voice seemed to reply to his thoughts. "I will assist Mr. Chekov in his computations."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." And Kirk was close enough to the Vulcan to catch the almost-whispered reply, "It will be my pleasure, Captain."

Kirk nodded silently, and turned into the full radiance of Jael's smile. Beside her, McCoy regarded him with the warm gratitude of a man whose most profound expectations had been realized. And as the only member of the crew who would never be bothered with military protocol, the doctor closed both hands on Kirk's shoulders and steered him toward the turbolift.

"As ranking medical officer here, I prescribe immediate rest and a dose of alcohol, right now, Jim."

"Bones, I can't leave right now . . ."

"Yes, you can, you know. And I'm not prescribing just for you. Come on."

Jael spoke briefly to Uhura before joining them in the elevator. Kirk was somewhat concerned about her silence, but McCoy did not seem worried. Whatever had passed between them at Clulow, there was a steadily deepening bond growing between them. Kirk reminded himself to inquire into the history of Dr. McClullough.

Her request, after McCoy had poured a liberal dose of brandy for each of them in the comforting quiet of his office, revealed something of her quality.

"I am, of course, entirely at your disposal, Captain Kirk; but after the comet is destroyed, I wonder if you would allow me to transmit a report to the Starbase? I'll make it as brief as possible, but I would like to provide them with the background information to begin work as soon as possible."

Kirk looked at her blankly. "Work?"

"I know that it will be a very long time before Jellicle will be of interest to the IPA branch of the Federation, but there are sufficient funds available under Research and Probability to prepare a strong case for a mission to Jellicle. Which brings me to another request . . ." Her face was open and alive with determination, but her voice softened; and the concern in her eyes was deep and very personal. "Would you be willing to present a statement on the viability of the Jellican culture to the Advisory Council?"

"Certainly, Dr. McClullough. And of course you can use the subspace radio for your report. But a mission to Jellicle . . .?"

"To break the circle, Captain. To help them to look up to the stars without fear. Not in the next hundred years, or even in the next thousand. But when they're reaching beyond survival toward the civilization they've attained so many times before, I hope to insure that they'll be able to learn that they are not alone. That there are worlds beyond their world. And that we need them." She stared down at the glass in her hand, embarrassed at what she thought was a sermon he did not need to hear.

Kirk finished his drink and looked steadily at her. "That is perhaps the most practical statement of faith in the strength and potential of the Federation I have heard in recent years. Thank you. I will do all I can to help you establish a mission to Jellicle. On one condition."

She looked up sharply.

"That whenever, in the next hundred years, or the next thousand, contact is made with the Jellicans, they will never be told that a Federation ship destroyed a comet." *Let it become a myth*, he thought. Let the Jellicles forget, even though he would not. He would always know the scalded taste that brandy could not sweeten, the weight in his heart that no medicine could ease. The most heartbreaking part of it was the knowledge that he would live with it. The guilt would become part of his life, and he would, somehow, find the strength to endure it.

It was Kirk's turn to be embarrassed at the wondering admiration in her eyes. He set down his glass and moved toward the door. "Now if you will excuse me, Doctors. The prescription was quite effective, and there is important work waiting for me"

McCoy remained gazing at the closed door after the captain left, remembering the first time he had lost a patient. The paralyzing grief and guilt that had almost destroyed him, that had threatened to poison his whole life. But the instinct for life had been stronger than the horror of death. He knew the set of Kirk's shoulders, the look in his eyes, the timbre of his voice, the firmness of his stride. The spirit was wounded, terribly hurt; but not broken. It would heal whole. And McCoy had always believed that scar tissue, even on the heart, was the surest sign of life, of strength, and of intelligence.

He splashed more brandy into Jael's glass. "To James T. Kirk."

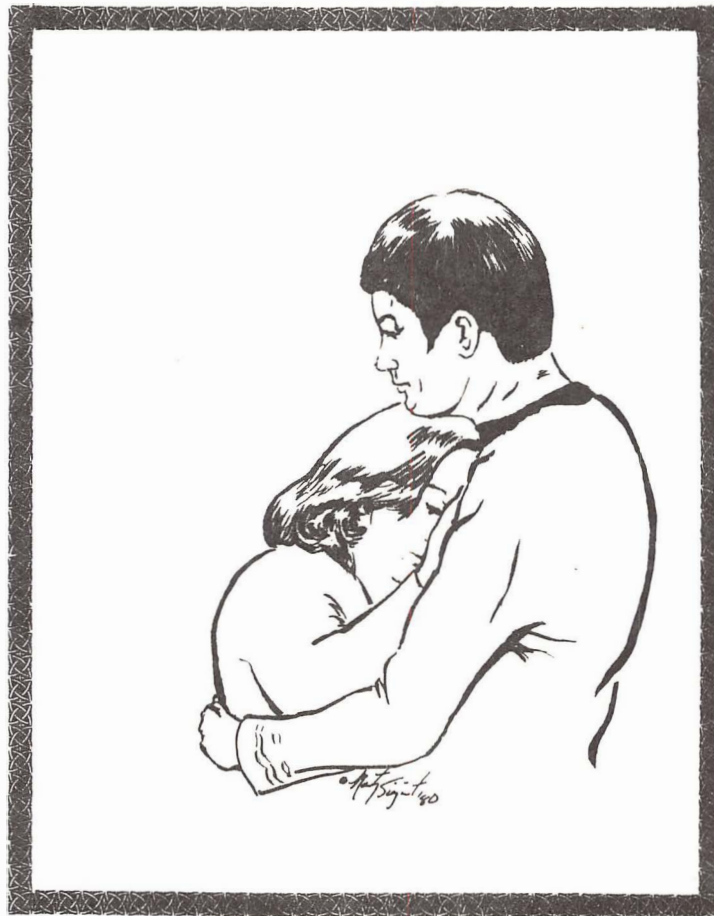
"He is all that you said he was."

"And maybe more."

The worry hovered in her eyes a moment before she spoke. "I should have said more, but it didn't seem to be the right time Perhaps later, before I leave; or perhaps it would be easier if you spoke to him for me. I wanted to thank him, and you, and Mr. Spock, for reminding me that we're not just one big federated family fight. That we really are on the same side."

"My dear lady, I never doubted it. But on the same side against what?"

She smiled faintly at the reminder of their last dispute, and leaned wearily against the warmth of his arms to hide her tears. McCoy felt the spreading damp on his tunic and nodded gently. "No. Not against anything. For something. For the future. For life."



Reunion

Rusty Hancock

"What I want to know," said Lt. Ken Sharp, "is whether we should be drinking a toast to Will's memory at all, since we don't really know whether he's dead or not."

"Oh, come on, Ken, drink up," said the young female officer sitting by him.

"Then drink we all to a pioneer and a hero," Lt. P-rit said, raising his bowl. Although his surgically altered vocal equipment could now manage English rather well, he was still constrained to take his food and drink in a somewhat alien manner. Nonetheless, he had been accepted by his companions long before to the point where none of them really cared, even if they noticed.

"Hardly seems a fitting place for a memorial service," Lt. Jeanne O'Mara observed. "Will never was much for pub crawling." She glanced around the large drinking and dancing area provided by the space station.

"This is hardly a pub, Redhead," said Chief "Awful Al" Cooper, assistant security officer of the space station in which the five had gathered, it being a central point and convenient for one of their rare get-togethers. "And you're surely not implying that Will Decker couldn't raise hell with the best of 'em when he got going - me being the best of 'em, of course."

"I am reminded of a line from an old, old movie I was viewing yesterday," interjected their fifth companion, a slight man in rather out of date clothing - not military - who seemed in many ways to be more alien to the group than the feline P-rit. "How many of you remember a mid-20th-century film called 'Gone With The Wind'?"

"Whoever remembers raise their hands," Sharp said, not altogether unkindly.

"Pardon me," Professor Donald MacKinley said. "It's hard to leave the classroom behind at times. But as I was saying, dear friends - and I do still consider each one of you a dear friend, you know - there was a character in this movie named Ashley Wilkes, of whom another character made much the same kind of observation: that Ashley, who was a rather frail looking man, could gamble, horserace, and drink as well as any of his peers. The difference was that his heart wasn't in it. He merely did it as a convenience - in order that his companions not be embarrassed. I've often wished I could have managed that...."

Several of the group spoke at once, reassuring MacKinley that he was not an embarrassment to them but rather a source of pride, that his scholarly achievements reflected honor on the small group of former Deltan Embassy personnel known to themselves--and a few others as well--as The Control Group. They had originally called themselves The Guinea Pigs, but later abandoned it as undignified.

"Gentlemen, shall we drink?" P-rit reminded, in his quiet, almost caressing voice.

"And lady," Cooper added.

"We all know I'm a lady, Al - it goes without saying," O'Mara said.

"Amen," Cooper amended.

"To my best friend," Sharp said, sounding tightly controlled, as though he didn't quite trust his voice. "Fondly remembered and sorely missed."

They drank silently to their absent former companion.

"By god, I feel like we ought to shatter the glasses," Cooper said solemnly. "But the management would be after our asses."

"Besides, they're shatterproof," MacKinley said.

"Ah, there are times," Cooper sighed, "when I could do with a bit less technological advancement and a lot more good, old-fashioned ceremony and sentiment."

"You sound a lot like my first Chief Surgeon on the *Enterprise*," P-rit said.

"That Dr. McCoy you used to tell tales about?" Sharp asked.

"The same. A true--I believe you say 'character'." Nevertheless I learned a great deal working under him. With him, actually. He rarely made any of us feel that we were beneath him in any way--unless he were quite angry, in which case he shouted and swore and said any number of things he was sorry for afterwards."

The group sat staring into their unfortunately shatterproof glasses for a time. After a time, Sharp broke silence. "God, how I wish I could talk to Will now."

"Do we even know where he is?" O'Mara asked.

"More precisely, we don't know quite *what* he is," MacKinley said.

"We don't even know that he's capable of communication," O'Mara continued.

"Oh, he can communicate," MacKinley affirmed.

There was a chorus of "How do you know's" and similar observations.

"Classified," MacKinley said with a tiny smile.

"Is that what you're working on now?" Cooper boomed, throwing an arm around the smaller man's shoulder.

MacKinley drooped under the weight. "Not so loud, Allen, or you'll have me in a great deal of trouble." Ten ears perked up to the best of their abilities, P-rit's doing by far the best job. "Yes, the time may come when I will have good news for us all. One of those 'giant leaps for mankind,' you know."

O'Mara laughed. "Sometimes I think you and Ken and Will never forgave the universe for letting you be born too late to be the first man to step on another planet."

"And in our own ways we've done what we could to remedy the flaw," MacKinley said.

"Is it true he's with the Deltan woman?" O'Mara said, trying to sound as though her interest were purely academic.

The group began to change position on seats, look intently at objects that had formerly held little interest for them, and generally exhibit signs of embarrassment. They were all aware of Jeanne O'Mara's interest in Will Decker, and all knew that their mutual stay at the Federation Embassy on Delta had perhaps been harder on her than on any of the male members, for different reasons.

MacKinley sighed. "Languages can be so imprecise, so misleading," he said at last. "The simple little preposition 'with' can have such a highly emotional connotation. You could as well say that he's 'of' her, now. Possibly any other preposition you might choose to employ. Will, Ilia, and V-ger - that was the entity's name, if you didn't know - have, ah, merged--permanently, as far as we can tell. Their energies flow together. They are components in a larger whole that nonetheless thinks as one unified entity, much as any person can have a mass of stored data and experiences in his mind, and have different reactions from time to time, based on different experiences and his past reactions to them. Do you follow me?"

"I'm not sure I even want to follow you," O'Mara said flatly. "In fact, I think I'm going to the ladies' room for awhile." She stood and backed away. "Don't worry, Ken - I can tell from the look on your face you think I might flush myself out into space, but I won't. I'm just... finding this harder to discuss than I thought I would. Excuse me?"

"Look at her marching off like a soldier going to war," Cooper said admiringly. "That's some lady. You oughta marry her, Ken."

"Me?" Sharp said, sounding totally shocked.

"Why not?" Cooper said defensively. "What's wrong with her?"

"Oh, nothing - nothing at all," Sharp said hastily. "She's - like you say, a fine lady. It's just that I always thought of her as...well...taken, I guess."

"But he didn't 'take back,'" P-rit said. "Therefore she could have been yours."

"Not until she became emotionally unentangled," MacKinley explained. "They do things a bit differently where you come from, my friend."

"Did we ever figure out if that was why they sent you to Delta?" Cooper asked. "I mean, your people

and theirs thinking the same about, ah, certain things?"

"If that were the prime criterion, I'm sure I would never have been there at all," P-rit answered. He seemed to be smiling, although no one could have said for sure why they thought so.

"Actually I believe P-rit's people are rather less serious about it all than the Deltans," MacKinley said.

"Not less serious," P-rit corrected, "just more promiscuous. We take it *very* seriously. Not depriving ourselves is a serious concern with us."

"Goddamn it, this time I *know* you're smiling," Cooper said, smiling himself and this time choosing the feline to embrace. The smaller alien took it calmly, knees buckling a bit but making no move to rebuff the larger officer.

"Certainly I have the right. You owe me many smiles, to make up for the way you used to laugh at the sight of my poor bent legs in a Star Fleet uniform. Do you remember what you used to say?"

"Aw, hell, won't you ever forget that?"

"You realize that if my reflexes couldn't kill you, my medical training would surely have allowed me to devise a poison that would have put you out of my way." Cooper slowly removed the arm. The feline reached out a stubby fingered appendage and put it back. "It's a good thing I learned long ago that you and I were brothers under the, ah, fur?" He examined a hairy hand draped around his shoulder. "Yes, fur. I will never forget, but I forgave long ago. I have long considered you a litter mate and most likely will until I die - unless something very strange indeed happens - such as your running into a wandering alien entity and becoming part of its medulla oblongata, in which case I would have a lot of very knotty philosophical problems to sort out, would I not?"

"Christ, P-rit, sometimes you're worse than MacKinley."

"But I'll bet you my next year's salary that's the first time anyone has ever referred to AI as his 'litter mate' and gotten away with it," Sharp laughed, downing another drink.

"Hey, P-rit," Cooper said confidentially, "something else you never did tell me before our little gang got disbanded. You know when you used to go off on your own and get in late and we teased you about 'cattin' around' and you didn't want to talk about it?"

"You keep saying things that make it sound as though my memory were totally nonfunctional," P-rit said. "Of course I remember."

"Did you really have yourself a Deltan girlfriend?" Cooper blurted.

P-rit hesitated a beat, then said "Yes, I did."

Cooper waited. "Well?"

"I answered your question."

"The hell you did!"

"Are there further questions?"

"You should go work with Donald, P-rit," Sharp said. "Sometimes you sound like you'd have no trouble at all working with machine languages."

"I admire precision. Perhaps that's why I'm being posted to Vulcan shortly."

"My gawd," Cooper said, stunned. "This whole group is going to glory while I go to hell. Ken, I know you're up for Lt. Commander, Don's working on a top secret project that probably tickles him silly, P-rit's getting an assignment I know he's wanted for years--"

"Although much of the known universe would think *I'm* the one going to hell," P-rit interjected.

"And Will's been transmogrified into God knows what, and Jeanne's going back to Delta--at her own request," said Sharp.

"I'll be damned," Cooper said, open mouthed.

"So will I," said MacKinley.

"Let's make it unanimous," P-rit added, "since I'm already going to hell."

"Why would she do that?" Cooper blurted.

"Possibly just to see what makes them tick. She could barely stand it watching Will and Ilia on Delta. Now the thought of them being permanently merged just short of drives her nuts. And not very far short at that," Sharp said.

"C'mon, P-rit," Cooper wheedled, "before Jeanne comes back and it gets too hairy to discuss Deltans - no offense - somebody, for once, has just gotta tell me - how did they get the rep?" I mean, they aren't that terrific."

"are you certain of that?"

Cooper frowned. "Yeah, I'm certain."

"Well, mine was."

Cooper was still waiting. P-rit seemed to have said everything he had to say. "Was *what*? What made you take chances on breaking curfew like that? If you didn't have the reflexes you've got you'd have been a hide hanging up in the mess hall with a sign saying "If you wanna be a tomcat, be it somewhere else!"

"What was yours like?"

"Oh, she was--" Sharp began.

Everyone turned to stare at him. "You too?" Cooper said incredulously.

"I was addressing the question to Al," P-rit said softly.

Sharp began to stammer. "I thought everyone knew."

"Say, what's the matter with us? A buncha good ole boys--why didn't we ever discuss all this stuff with each other? If we had problems, why didn't we talk? Soldiers all alone in a foreign land, prettiest girls in the universe, all that--what's the matter with us?"

"She was very special. I didn't talk about her to anyone--except Will," Sharp said, again reining his voice in tightly as though he expected it to bolt with him down some path of unloosed emotion that he couldn't bear to contemplate.

"Then why didn't you bring her back with you, if she was so damn special?" Cooper had to know.

"I don't know," Sharp muttered, gulping the remainder of a drink. He immediately poured himself another. He was not usually a drinking man.

"Sure you do," Cooper persisted.

"I said I didn't know and that's that," Sharp knifed at his persistent questioner.

"I left mine because she bored me. P-rit probably couldn't get used to not feeling any fur. What's your excuse?"

Sharp took another drink and glared at Cooper in silence.

"You're gonna be a goddam Lt. Commander, might even get your own command, and you go all tonguetied over some woman you left years and years ago. Jesus H. Christ, what kind of officer material is Star Fleet stuck with these days?" Cooper sighed exaggeratedly, and smacked the table with his hand, shaking his head. He peered sideways at Sharp to see what effect his words were having.

"I didn't leave her!" Sharp yelled -- "She wouldn't come with me. Don't you think I tried everything I could think of--" He broke off suddenly, appalled at himself.

"I don't know how any living creature could possibly be bored with such a woman as I found," P-rit interceded, attempting to re-focus the attention away from Sharp. "She was the epitome of everything female - fur or none. I couldn't have found a more satisfying partner among my own kind. She anticipated my every wish."

"Yes....that's it exactly," Sharp said, sounding rather fuzzy and unfocussed, his brain lost in alcohol and memories. "Any mood I was in, she could sense and compensate. Anything I wanted, she thought of first. Sometimes I didn't even know I wanted it - but she did. The thought of any other woman after her was simply insupportable. I felt like I'd have to search the entire galaxy through and then head for Andromeda before I found her equal."

"You're young," P-rit said, leaning over and placing one furry paw-hand atop Sharp's. "You had time for

all that. You still do."

Cooper felt the hair on his neck tingle and realized that the alien was effecting some sort of power transfer, an empathic healing of the sort his kind were known for, which was why many of them met off their own planet were in the medical profession. Shortly Sharp looked up and surveyed the group around the table. His eyes were clearer and he seemed much more like his earlier self. P-rit sat quietly, blinking his green eyes frequently and nodding his head. He took a deep breath and blew it out in short puffs. "Alcohol is the curse of the universe," he said at last.

"No--Deltan women are," Sharp said. "I wonder if Star Fleet knows how many of us simply ignore its regulations there?"

"I have always suspected that it simply makes an attempt and then sits back and shakes its collective head in amazement at our audacity and perhaps stupidity," P-rit offered. "I don't think it is really anticipated that not a one of the healthy, virile young men at the embassy will break such a rule."

"I'll bet Donald didn't," Cooper said.

There was no answer from that quarter.

"I said--"

"I know what you said," MacKinley said. "And since we seem to be having a mass confession, you're wrong. Perhaps I didn't have quite as lengthy or...physical an attachment as you fellows, but there was this one girl --"

"You met her at the library, right?" Cooper said.

"How did you know?"

Cooper shook his head. "Go on, go on."

"She was beautiful of course--"

"Of course."

--but what really surprised me was that she was a student of classical languages. Classical Deltan languages, of course, although she spoke English. With an accent. Really a charming accent. We used to sit and talk for hours. Sometimes afterwards I wondered what all we'd found to talk about, and then I wouldn't be able to remember, which is really odd for me, because I have practically eidetic recall, you know, but we did manage to keep occupied. It....wasn't entirely platonic. Finally. Just before I left. It seemed at once jarring and fitting. I don't know how to explain it. We both knew there would be only the one time, and that was all right. But I'll never forget *her* either."

"And Will's girl was eventually destined to become a Star Fleet Officer," P-rit said. "We all seem to have picked women who were exactly like ourselves. With one major difference."

"Hmph. Mine sure wasn't," Cooper objected. "In fact, she was hardly even pretty, compared with all those other girls. Can you really see me chasing a plain, quiet little thing that didn't even like to drink? Now P-rit, how can you say we picked women like ourselves?"

"Perhaps I was slightly to one side of the truth," P-rit said thoughtfully. "Not like ourselves - complementary to us. Able to provide what we lacked, what we wanted and needed."

"What I *want* is Jamie Hawthorne," Cooper insisted. "She may never play Shakespeare but she sure does look good - screen, cube, hologram, you name it."

"Then why did you keep going back?" P-rit asked.

Cooper's face collapsed. It seemed to be the first time he had ever been confronted with that question. "What do you mean?" he growled.

"It was not always you watching me come in, my friend. I also saw you returning from some secret destination, and frequently wished I could aid your return, for I feared that your clumsiness might jeopardize all our chances. But you always managed. And I was always spared the embarrassment of having to save you from yourself."

Cooper opened his mouth as if to roar some face-saving answer at the feline, then clamped it shut. His face turned several different colors in succession. "How do you know I was with the same one all those times?"

"Were you?"

"Yes. Yes! I was. I don't know why. I've asked myself a thousand times. I used to anyway. Then I just quit asking. Too confusing."

"Perhaps she was what you wanted, but you simply couldn't acknowledge it to yourself, for reasons of your own. Perhaps it seemed unmanly to admit you were content with a woman who was not a goddess."

"She sure wouldn't have jumped out of anybody's pink frosted cake, that's for sure," Cooper chuckled. Then he sobered again. "But god, was she sweet. I'd swear she'd never looked at another man, and she sure didn't when I was around. I couldn't believe it--not on Delta. I didn't think they had any virgins left. I didn't think they had any, *period*. But there she was. Pure. And the sweetest little thing you could imagine. No, I didn't talk about her much, or when I did, well, I talked about the kind of girls that'd jump out of pink frosted bachelor party cakes. Crazy, isn't it?"

"I've frequently thought your thought processes were a little scrambles," P-rit agreed, "but your heart, as you say, is in the right place."

"I was homesick," Sharp said, almost to himself. "I couldn't have admitted it if someone had tried to beat it out of me with a whip, but I was homesick. I wanted to be a good officer so much, so much it nearly killed me whenever I thought I wasn't measuring up. Will didn't worry so much, which is amazing when you consider what it must be like following in the footsteps of a father who'd been a career officer, like both of ours were. He was always patting me on the back, encouraging me, pushing me a little, like a big brother. Between the two of them, him and her, it gradually ceased to matter so much. All the little things that I magnified all out of proportion, they fell back into the right shape. They kept reassuring me that I was all right, so that finally I just believed it. My opinion of myself always depended so much on what my father thought of me that I couldn't escape it even after I'd escaped my father. I took him with me wherever I went. I used his measuring stick on myself, even while I cursed him for being a perfectionist. Thanks to them, I finally carved myself a new stick." He looked around. "Obviously at times I have relapses. But I know what the problem is now. And I won't have it forever."

"Remember the little techniques I taught you long ago," P-rit said, "for getting ahold of yourself, healing yourself, then dealing with the other problems that are not in yourself. Your body has the wisdom in itself. Use it. My people are not such oddlings in the universe, simply because we have acknowledged a gift and refined it. We are all creatures of the same universe. The same force created us all and sustains us with its eternal energy. Seek it. Use it. And speaking of sustenance, I would really like a fish sandwich right now."

"P-rit, you're a constant source of amazement," Sharp said. "Lulling me into a reverie with your sermon and then--You'll make a great hairy Vulcan."

"What kind of curse is that," came the voice of Jeanne O'Mara. "Great Hairy Vulcan?"

"You okay, Jeannie?" Cooper asked.

"I'm fine. Although I admit I didn't make it to the john."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing disastrous. I just walked around the room and wound up sitting over there--" She gestured. "--sort of behind those plants."

It was immediately obvious to them all that she would have been in a position to overhear everything they had said in her absence. "Yup, that's right. It was considerate of you to wait til I'd left, since Delta in general is a touchy subject with me, but I'm going to have to learn how to cope if I'm going to be stationed there, aren't I? And I *will* cope."

"That's one *fine* lady," Cooper breathed, as though the person he was talking about weren't there.

"I've requested some special champagne, served in special glasses. Here's our waiter now." A tall man appeared and set four genuinely glass glasses and one bowl down before them. "Right over there, Miss," he said, pointing toward one wall that was relatively bare of ornamentation.

"Thank you. Now I've got something to say that I may never get said right if I don't up and do it now." Fellows, it amazes me to discover that we're all just figuring it all out about the Deltan ladies. It's taken us all our lives to figure out what some women seem to be born knowing. Since the Deltans aren't shape-shifters or mental illusionists, all they've got to work with is their own minds and bodies--just like all the rest of us. They're very empathic, in certain tightly focussed areas of experience, but all they're doing is what any woman does if she's got any smarts at all--they figure out what their man wants and give it to him. And keep on giving. As long as he's their man. And they decide how long that will be.

"Will wanted a Star Fleet officer - someone he could work with, talk to, someone who could share the most important thing in his life. I'm that, sure. But he's also fascinated by the mysterious, the oblique, the never-before-explored. Where no man has gone before, all that, you know? I was too familiar. Ilia

was exotic, different, with that Deltan reputation - and yet she wanted to be a Fleet officer too. She was irresistible to him, in a way I never could be. "So now they're together, and I have to accept that. And I will. I'm working on it, believe me. I'm going to do it in the hardest place in the universe for me to do it in, because part of me's as stubborn and crazy as old Matt Decker, and Will loved that in me just like he loved his father. It just wasn't enough, you see. But it will be enough for someone else, someday."

"But where do those mysterious Deltan hormones we were briefed about figure into your scheme?" MacFarland asked. "Jeanne? P-rit? Anyone?"

P-rit replied with a small rumble in his throat, "Ah, that's just the point--we were carefully briefed, to the extent of Star Fleet's knowledge, and, as you say, forewarned is forearmed. Knowledge is always a powerful weapon, is it not?"

"Then you're saying we didn't fall victim to pheromones -- just to psychology?"

"Partly. Sounds deceptively simple, doesn't it? Of course I shouldn't speak for another species--"

"And yet," MacKinley mused, "the most perplexing problems are often solved by the simplest of procedures. We do sometimes look too long and hard in search of the obvious - or slice off part of the truth with Occam's razor."

"There *is* precedent," P-rit continued. "It is probably not generally known, nor should any of us discuss it further, but the women of Troyius also exert a powerful sexual influence, attributable to secretions from their tear glands. Several years ago, Admiral Kirk was - ah - exposed, shall we say - and I don't believe anyone who has ever served with him since would seriously consider *him* enslaved to the point of command incompetence. A different alien chemistry, an exceptional man--I know. But a sort of precedent for my argument. Kirk knew what he had to combat, and he simply did it. The extent to which all of us are still plagued by memories of Delta probably corresponds to the degree to which we were unprepared for the ladies' effect, and exactly *what* that effect would be, don't you see?" And then, none of us is an Admiral Kirk. He is either more complete than we, or simply more determined. None of us became the youngest starship captain in Fleet history--nor the youngest peacetime admiral. I'd wager he can barely remember his Trojan princess' name these days."

"Well, then, there's hope for us all," O'Mara said. "So now we're going to drink a proper toast and do it up right, just like an Irish wake, or a Jewish wedding. We're going to clear it all out." She filled the glasses all the way around and all raised them high.

"Here's to Will - and Ilia - and V-ger - wherever, and whoever, they may be. Like you said, Ken, only let's put it the right way around this time - sorely missed, but fondly remembered."

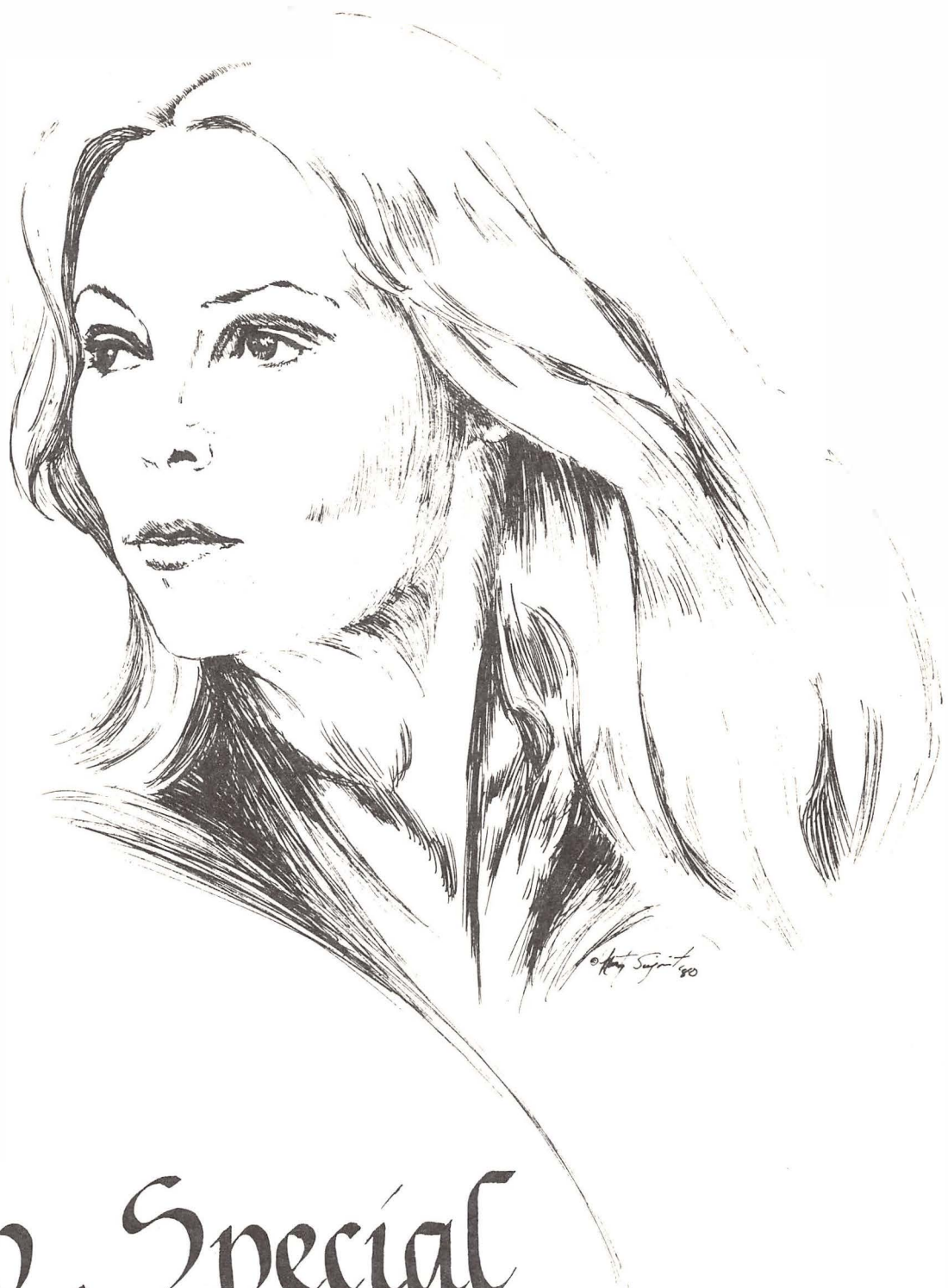
"And here's to you, too, O'Mara, you crazy Irish rose," Cooper said.

"That's not the name of the movie," MacKinley said. "But here's to both - or all - of you."

Sharp raised his glass silently. P-rit softly mumbled something in his own language, which seemed to have more meaning for him. All drank, and at O'Mara's signal, slammed their glasses against the wall. Against the particular synthetic of the wall, the pieces didn't fly so far as to cause a safety hazard, but they made a satisfying noise.

For a time the silence continued. Then P-rit looked up, licked what passed for his lips, and said "And now, do you suppose I could have that fish sandwich?"





No Special

Hurry

Allyson B

By Mandi Schultz & Cheryl Rice

*"She can kill with a smile, she can wound with her eyes,
she can ruin your faith with her casual lies...."*

Kirk raised the glass to his lips, then paused, peering over the rim. "I assume I got it because I was the best man for the job," he said, then realized the comment wasn't completely rhetorical. He forced a hitherto easy grin in the direction of Commodore Paul Caidan who sat opposite him. "Let me put it this way," he continued, then cleared his throat.

"Let me put it this way," Caidan countered. "What do you *really* think?" Finishing his wine, Caidan cast a hasty glance at his wrist chronometer, then got to his feet. "I hate to bear bad tidings and run, but the Caitan treaty delegates are waiting and they're overly fond of formalities like punctuality."

"You might tell them you got delayed cleaning up after the parade," Kirk said quietly.

Caidan's smile revealed perfectly even teeth. "And I do it extremely well, Captain. Good day."

Kirk had a sudden urge to shatter the glass he was holding. "We're not finished - sir."

The other man sighed obviously. "That's rather a matter of opinion, don't you think?"

"Tomorrow after breakfast - on the handball court." Kirk was incapable of restraining his command voice at that moment.

Surprisingly enough, Caidan grinned. "You won't like that."

"I picked it."

"Yes, but she's the one who taught me how to play."

Kirk smiled, rolling the slender glass between his palms, purposely not looking at the man he spoke to. "That's all right. She told me I'm the only one who ever beat her." There, he thought, top that.

Paul Caidan, who had known her longer than the starship captain had, didn't have much difficulty finding a comeback. "And you believed her?"

Six months...six solar months, he thought...has it been that long?

The *Enterprise* hung in space as though suspended in time. Indeed it was suspended, in a sense - in drydock. Starfleet, bursting with pride over the success of the overhauled ship, had requested it be docked for inspection. The recent past had been the equivalent of a test run and now a horde of technicians crawled over every inch of machinery to take readings, check gauges, measure stress points, etc. It reminded Kirk of a physical after a transplant operation. Although his crew was pleased enough with the sudden leave they had been given, the only one who seemed to be enjoying the situation was Scotty, proudly pointing out how well everything had been working.

Ship docked, Scotty in charge, crew scattered for the next two weeks, James Kirk had taken the shuttle flight to Babel largely on impulse. An impulse, he was forced to concede when he considered it objectively, that disturbed him because he hadn't expected it. Further introspection revealed its source was a sudden desire to be alone. Odd, he thought, since the *Enterprise* had resumed active duty with the Vger assignment only six solar months before.

As he took the ambulatory corridor to the tower's observation deck, he wondered how that feeling had managed to return without his noticing it had been creeping up on him.

The memories that jostled his newfound peace of mind breached his defenses the same way, obviously, he thought as he settled to enjoy the view from the deck. He could remember the last time he sat there - had it really been the same table? - an ice-blond with cat-eyes seated across from him, calmly sipping a very

*"Always a Woman to Me" © Billy Joel

very old champagne while he wondered how she could stand the taste. They'd held hands and watched the traffic perform its peculiar ballet, ships suspended in the docking system almost like a plaything hung over an infant's cradle. They had talked quietly, laughed gently, and planned passionately.

A servomechanism presenting him with his drink shook Kirk's mind from its reverie. He was embarrassed to admit even to himself that this was the fourth time he'd come to the deck to relive that memory. It was a high point of his former life, after all.

That was what bothered him about this trip, he realized. His unusual willingness to stroll down memory lane, as it were, even when the memories seemed to be ripping his heart out barehanded. Nevertheless, he felt compelled to go through with it even though there'd been three calls from McCoy inviting him to join the festivities over on Starbase IV. No, he would stay. Instinct had told him to go to Babel for a reason and if he didn't lose his mind first, he'd figure out what it was.

Meeting Paul Caidan on the day of his arrival, and in his favorite restaurant, hadn't been the highlight of the trip, but assuming they had buried the hatchet some time before, Kirk attempted something close to congeniality. At least he'd tried. It hadn't worked. Looking at Caidan again made all the time in between dissolve like melting snow. The only place they had disposed of any hatchets was in each others' backs.

"I don't suppose you've heard from her," Kirk had said over the last of his meal that day. "Subspace radio between our galaxy and theirs--"

"Are you serious?" Caidan wore an expression of utter incredulity.

Kirk shrugged. "Maybe your secret intelligence agency has a better communication system than 'Fleet does. We poor slob's can't signal between galaxies yet but that's because you get a bigger budget than the military does."

Caidan looked like he knew why the sphinx smiled. "I don't suppose . . . well, it was on my order that you weren't told so I might as well be the one to tell you."

Kirk felt the color draining from his face and there was that knifing sensation in the pit of his stomach again. Once he had been convinced that he was getting ulcers, and if he hadn't suddenly gotten so busy, he might have. "Don't," he said, quietly shaking his head. "I told her goodbye once and that was already once too often. She said she had to go with them. A matter of honor, she said, more important than--" He almost said "love--or me" but he had the distinct impression Caidan would laugh. Suddenly, he felt as though his skin were alive with invisible fire ants. "Where is she?"

"Precisely at the moment? Really even she is not important enough for us to keep that close an eye on her. She's in D-quadrant gathering intelligence for us. Did you really think she'd leave our galaxy before her work was finished?"

"She said she had to leave with the Rifferi. Their lord gave us the information we wanted--" Kirk began impatiently.

"Wanted? That's a calm way to put it. We wouldn't be sitting here--~~here~~ wouldn't be here--right now if Reisul hadn't helped the Federation." A man of peculiar loyalties, even Paul Caidan was compelled to be honest about the narrowly averted galactic disaster.

Commander Paul Caidan, the man who trained her to be the lying bitch she was, Kirk thought, the man who aided the controller of the Federation's espionage and intelligence agency. The man who called the starlord whose vital knowledge only saved the entire Federation from annihilation by his first name.

"I know that," Kirk said at last. "So who does it amuse you so much that I assume she kept this matter of honor that was so important and departed with them?"

"Simply, Captain, because the Rifferi were leaving our galaxy. You know she won't leave. She can't. With Reisul's help, we beat Yang the Unspeakable this time--"

"That's a euphemism," Kirk said. "I'd say 'crushed' is more accurate."

"But the weapon and the body were never discovered. She knows that as long as he's alive he'll try again."

"And that's *her* matter of honor," Kirk summed it up, knowing it was true. She'd sold her body--and his honor--for it often enough. To her the Federation's honor really was precious little by comparison.

"Something like that, Kirk."

"How did Reisul and his people take it?"

"She jumped ship before they reached the Rim. But you know her at least as well as I do, Kirk."

Reisul might've been extremely relieved to be rid of her."

Knowing sometimes there was nothing sadder than a wish granted, Kirk chuckled softly. He remembered a feeling something like that. Part of him hated her and the rest burned for her. "Where is she, Caidan?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"The lady and I have unfinished business."

"Not according to her. Surely you know she'll never see you again."

"Maybe that's what she said but I don't believe it. And maybe you're lying - sir."

"You're a reckless man, Kirk. I always told her that, but--"

Dear lord, Kirk thought, make him say that she loved me anyway..."But..."

"But Chantal is like a man where things like that are concerned. She takes what she wants when she wants it and worries later."

Kirk suddenly realized his fists were clenched. "Where is she, Caidan? So help me, I'll--"

"You'll! what, Captain? Do something worth risking that new ship for?"

That draining feeling took him again. He relaxed visibly.

"By the way, how is she?" Caidan asked of the ship as if she were alive.

Does he expect me to salivate? Kirk wondered. "The *Enterprise* is as she should be," he said simply. "It was worth the cut in pay," he threw in casually, referring to what he had lost resigning his admiralty appointment.

Their gazes locked and each knew what the other was thinking, that credits weren't all Kirk had given up to get where he was now which, oddly enough, was essentially back where he had been before it all started.

*"and she only reveals what she wants you to see,
she cries like a child but she's always a woman to me"*

"I am going with him," Chantal said, purposely avoiding his eyes.

Kirk couldn't believe her words. "Don't be silly. Neither of us has to now. You know the Rifferi need supplies for their journey across our galaxy. The Consul is making trade arrangements right now. They'll come to some sort of reasonable agreement before the day is out."

"You cannot make reasonable agreements with a zealot. Reisul is not just a holy man. He's starlord of his entire system. And he is not just the starlord, he's their holy man. Why can you not see? Either way, he has no reason to bend to the Consul's will. Reisul gave them the information and aid they needed to defeat Yang and when he did that his terms were perfectly clear. He wants one of us to continue with him on his journey. He will have you as heir apparent or me for...well, for his reasons...and the bargain was a matter of honor."

"Chantal...he could have both of us," Kirk said finally and still his words surprised him.

She looked desperate. "You know you do not mean that. You cannot leave here. This is your time and place."

"And you're not one of us?"

"I never have been. I am not bound like you are."

He caught her hand, the one that wore the deathbird ring and his ring side by side. "How can you say that, even as a joke, after everything that's happened?"

"It is *because* of everything, Jim. Why do you refuse to understand?" She shrugged, silver-pale hair framing her finely chiseled features, then tried to walk away but he wouldn't release her. Turning to face him with a pained expression she went on. "I love you more than I love living. But the world is not the two of us. The world is waiting on us, Jim, on our decision."

"I can't let you do this."

"For once, Jim, let us think with our heads instead of our bodies. I have nothing in this life but you, and, if you go, there is nothing left here for me. But this is your place, you have people who care about you. You have something to miss. Except for you, I do not. Be reasonable."

For a second, he thought he was going to slap her. "Reasonable?" he burst. "What in hell, on earth, or anywhere in this galaxy is reasonable? An ancient alien warlord comes within inches of blowing the Federation off the charts only because a starlord-turned-Moses just happened to be leading his caravan through our space at the right time with just the right information to save us all," Kirk caught his breath then went on, "Which he gave us only after he managed to extract a promise for very special payment that was made under extreme emergency conditions and wouldn't stand up in a court of law anywhere in this galaxy." The ringing in his head threatened to shatter his eardrums but he continued. "Now you're telling me that you've decided to join them to be a slave to that religious fanatic who probably wants to keep you chained to his bed when he's not busy torturing the demons out of you - and you're telling me to be reasonable?" He rubbed his forehead but it didn't stop the pain. "Good lord, Chantal, what's reason anymore?" In his fury he didn't realize he'd released his hold on her.

Chantal moved slightly, then spun around to face him, the small, glittering stiletto she always carried in her boot now in her hand. "Please do not worry, Jim. He will not hurt me."

His eyes widened. "Dear god, Chantal, you're not going to kill him, too?" He regretted the "too" but he couldn't erase it.

She shook her head. "I only said he would not hurt me."

Kirk took a deep breath. "Chantal, this is beginning to sound like those discussions we used to have before the holocaust on Capella. I used to feel like I was going crazy because they never made sense."

"I know," she said quietly. "I helped."

"God, no," he sighed. "You kept me going."

"Of course I did, Jim. I caused all the problems."

"Quit trying to change the subject. It won't work." He realized he felt exhaustion closing in and couldn't remember the last time he'd slept eight hours straight. "Finish dressing so we can go to the Consul meeting."

"No, Jim," she said, sheathing the weapon. "I am not going to the meeting. I am packing." She turned away from him.

Ice cold, he cleared his throat. "What's the matter, Chantal? Bored at last?"

She refused to be baited and failed to respond.

"At least that I can understand. I guess things have been pretty dull lately compared to before. You don't have anyone to poison me against and you've run out of lies to tell me and reasons to tell them. Or have your masters found you a bigger fish now? An admiral maybe?"

Her lank frame before him began to tremble, suddenly, uncontrollably, and she sank to her knees. "No more, please, no more...if you ever truly loved me, no more..."

By the time he reached her, her body was racked with immense sobs, tears streaming down the pearlike cheeks. Kneeling by her, he cradled her in his arms and rocked her as though soothing a child.

"You of all people should understand," she said in a whisper, looking up at him through lashes that glittered with tears. "It's the only decent thing I've done in my life."

"But you're doing it with *our* life, Chantal."

She clasped her arms around his neck. "I never loved before, and never will again. For whatever it is worth, you are my only love. Perhaps I can finally bring some dignity to my existence by doing this."

He wasn't sure where her trembling stopped and his started. "Chantal, stop talking nonsense like this. You're not going with them and that's final. I...I forbid it."

She rendered the faintest smile. "You fool," she said softly. "When have you ever been able to stop me from doing what I must do?" Her lower lip quivered. "Please do not forget me. I know it is not fair but don't ever forget me. No matter what happens, I will always love you."

He pulled her into his arms, covering her face with kisses. "I won't let you go," he whispered fiercely. "I won't...I can't..."

*"she can lead you to love, she can take you or leave you,
she can ask for the truth but she'll never believe you,
and she'll take what you give her as long as it's free,
she steals like a thief but she's always a woman to me"*

Kirk didn't know how long he'd slept. He was only conscious of the silver amazon in his arms and the fact that his back was twinging because they'd fallen asleep on the floor some time before. The skylight overhead informed him that the sun had long since set. They'd missed the meeting. The arrangements had been made and since no one had come beating on the door to drag either of them away, they were safe.

He gently kissed the top of her head, thinking of all the times he'd either cursed or blessed the powers that be for putting her into his life. He thought too of the time he first realized that he would always both love and hate her. As surely as his right arm was a part of him, so was she. On Capella, so long before, as the puzzle pieces fell into place, revealing her to be a murderess, a whore, a spy, a dealer in lives, a trader in death and destruction, and a stealer of souls. Then on Babel when she stood before him and admitted it as tho she were daring him to continue to retain her. Afterwards, when he'd come to his senses, he dragged her from Caidan's bed and brought her to his own. She'd struggled and cursed him. He'd slapped her when she bit him and before he could see it, her knife sung its way across his chest. But the sudden sight of his blood seemed to appall her and she'd stared wide-eyed, panting to catch her breath.

"It seems you've left your mark on me," he'd said then.

Tears like twin diamonds inched down her cheeks, silvergold hair hung about her face and streamed over her shoulders, and he thought she was the most glorious sight he had ever seen, incredibly, worth whatever the price. Glorious, that was the word for her, and for what they had together.

Chantal stirred slightly in his arms and the movement brought Kirk to the present. Craning his neck to look down, he saw that the petal-soft lips rested on the line of the scar on his flesh. The sight excited him tremendously. Groaning softly, he tightened his hold on her. She moved again, then her eyes opened suddenly.

"You all right?" he asked quietly.

She seemed to purr in reply.

"I can remember a time when I was the one who went crazy and then you had to comfort me," he chuckled, feeling a delicate finger trace the scar line. "Sure you're all right?"

"Quite," she seemed to sigh.

"I've got to leave," he remembered with a sigh. "They're probably dragging the lake for me by now."

She drew herself up catlike next to him, the glorious rain of her hair covering her like a mantle. "Will you be back tonight?" she asked, looking almost sleepy.

"Probably not, it could be very late."

"I shall wait up for you."

"You don't have to," he said, finding his clothes. "I think you need a good night's sleep as much as I do. In the morning we'll have breakfast and then wave goodbye to the Rifferi together."

She didn't reply but merely watched him in silence.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked again.

She nodded.

"And no more nonsense about offering yourself as sacrifice?"

Without receiving a verbal reply, he bent and kissed her hard on the mouth. "I love you, Chantal," he said intensely. "I won't ever let go of you." He broke away suddenly, strode to the door and then out of it.

Slender fingers touched lips, trembling. The six-fingered hand reached to the door while the other clenched to a fist to stifle the sound that caught in her throat. She shuddered until her head cleared, then looked at the tiny droplets of blood issuing from the teethmarks left on the hand. Shakily, she got to her feet and went to the intercom.

*"She takes care of herself,
she can win if she wants,
she's ahead of her time,
she never gives out and she never gives in,
she just changes her mind"*

Chantal left the bed reluctantly, but knew there was little time in which to finish packing. She had made arrangements to put most of her things in storage under another name so she was taking only the clothes and personal items she thought she would need. This assignment was going to take a little more cunning than she'd recently been practicing, but that excited her. She knew she'd gotten soft during the time she'd spent with Krik and Alpha agents who got soft tended to die very nastily and suddenly.

Quietly, she tiptoed across the room and began to dress in the traveling clothes she'd left out of her luggage. Kirk would not be back before noon, she'd been assured of that. His room was being monitored and the minute sounds of life were detected, Caidan would keep him busy enough to give her the time she needed.

Dressed, she moved to the desk and put a blank cartridge into the console. She pressed a button to activate the unit and took a deep breath. "Please remember that I love you," she said just loud enough for the machine to hear. Retrieving the cartridge, she placed it on the desk. Then she removed the gold and diamond ring she'd worn since that night in the snow-capped mountains when Jim gave it to her, and placed it next to the tape. The ache in her heart seemed to roar in her ears, a cacophony of silence.

Standing in the doorway of the room, she looked back to the bed. He certainly was beautiful, she thought, looking at the sleeping body of the young man there. She told herself that her feelings about beauty and art really couldn't be denied, and he was classically beautiful. She'd seen holograms of ancient sculptures that he might have modeled for. Dark wavy hair against pale skin, the heroic nose and generous mouth, the lean hard body so different from what she had grown accustomed to. It was a pity that she had to leave him so soon. The time she had to spend with the Rifferi did not promise to be very entertaining. Resigned, she shouldered her totebag and called for a servomechanism to help her with the rest of her luggage. Then on impulse she changed the order for the pick-up to an hour later. She slowly walked back to the bed, scattering clothes as she went. Slipping under the covers she started lightly kissing the young man awake. Half-drunk with sleep, he pulled her into his arms. While she could still think, she admired his beauty. He wore his glorious youth and shining innocence like a coat of silver armor. She vaguely wondered what his name was.

No matter. All she wanted was a temporary refuge from reality. She didn't love him, she would never love again. But he was young and beautiful. And two out of three wasn't bad.

*"She'll promise you more than the garden of Eden,
then she'll carelessly cut you and laugh while you're bleeding"*

"What do you mean, she's gone?" Kirk stared at him in utter astonishment.

"Surely you knew?"

"Caidan, if this is another of your games--"

"You can save that tone for subordinates, Kirk. You knew the arrangements. Chantal left with the Rifferi this morning."

"But the Consul--"

"The Consul had to vote on the plan, and they did it gladly, too. I think Chantal will probably even receive some kind of commendation for her services above and beyond the--"

"Dammit, has everyone lost their minds? She wasn't going with them. She told me last night that she wasn't."

"And she gave a superb performance, I'm sure," Caidan said matter-of-factly, "to an especially appreciative audience. She kept you from attending the meeting."

Kirk felt as though he'd been hit. "When did they leave orbit? If they're not out of the star system yet, there's still a chance." He went to the intercom, intending to begin arranging his pursuit.

"I'm afraid you're grounded temporarily, Captain," Caidan went on silkily. "The deck won't take your call."

"I assume I'm grounded until they're far enough to go into warp?"

"Approximately that long," Caidan agreed.

"Then you'd better get ready to put me under guard because that's the only way you'll keep me here."

"That can be arranged, Captain. "But before we get official, why don't you go to her room?"

Kirk knew he was being baited but he couldn't resist. He made his way to her quarters in a barely contained frenzy. The door opened and he almost collided with a dark-haired young man on his way out.

"What the devil-- Where's Chantal?"

"She's not here," the younger man said quietly, studying the other thoughtfully. "Are you...is your name Jim?"

With a sensation not unlike sleepwalking, Kirk nodded.

"She said your name," the young man said, "and then she cried."

Kirk brushed past him and entered the bedroom, knowing what he was likely to find so he refused to look at the bed. Aware of his intense jealousy, Chantal had used that tactic before when she felt she had to say something to him that words would not express. Unable to understand her needs, he had blotted the incidents from his memory.

The closets were empty and the room was conspicuously tidy since all her possessions had been removed. It was so tidy in fact that the items on the desk looked like clutter.

The ring burned in his hand when he touched it. In his other hand he held the cartridge, wondering whether to play it or destroy it immediately. He would never know which was the right choice. He slid it into the console. Hearing her voice brought a strangled incoherent cry from the depths of his being. Wrong choice. Again.

*"But she'll bring out the best and the worst you can be,
blame it all on yourself 'cause she's always a woman to me"*

He realized that it was the sound of his own cry that woke him. He was shaking, covered with sweat. He ran a hand through his hair and tried to breathe deeply several times, then started to cough. His nightmare had taken him back into that room the day he realized she was never coming back. The insomnia had started then. When he got the *Enterprise* back, he was suddenly able to sleep again, but then the nightmares started.

It had been awhile since he'd felt so desperate for a drink. There'd been that, too, because sometimes it did not matter how hard he tried, he could not erase the perfectly clear and crisp image of her face from his mind. And sometimes, even worse, he couldn't quite remember it.

*"She is frequently kind and she's suddenly cool,
she can do as she pleases, she's nobody's fool!"*

The handball game ended in a tie with both men nearly exhausted as they went into the showers. The verbal fencing was more strenuous than the game they had just played. Suddenly drained from it all, they went through the cool-down rituals and were finally in the locker room, preparing to leave. They'd done all this in almost total silence since leaving the court, except for the most prefatory of remarks.

"So what's the bottom line?" Kirk said at last. "I know you're itching to tell me something and I've been trying to figure out exactly what. You've already made sure I realized she left me with and for a lot of lies. You've taken whatever I might have had there. What else do I have that you can take?" Kirk's ears could scarcely believe the words they heard. It was exactly what he was feeling but he couldn't understand why he was exposing his most private of feelings to a man he did quite literally hate - and one whom he knew returned the feeling. "Are they taking my ship again? You've convinced them it needs a younger man for the job?"

Caidan looked mildly amused. "I only wish I had the kind of power you seem to think I have. I'm afraid I really don't know what you expect of me. Besides, the Federation and Starfleet owe you a great deal, Captain. It was your expertise and know-how that enabled us to act with the information we got from the Rifferi to stop Yang. As for my agency," Caidan paused briefly in thought, then went on, "well, you've had our formal apology for the things that happened while you were involved with one of our agents. And you turned down the monetary remuneration our director offered you."

"Damn you, Caidan, I don't want your money! Just tell me what bomb you're going to drop on me next. Ok, so Chantal's alive and she's still in our galaxy, but she won't see me. And thanks to the fact that

I'm a good soldier, I've been rewarded...rewarded," he repeated the word thoughtfully. "You did it, didn't you? 'Fleet operations kicked poor Decker out from under his braid for a reason. They knew I didn't want to be window dressing. The admiral's aboard the flagship but the captain is really in command. To make me happy, the *Enterprise* would have to be all mine. And as long as I've got her and cleaned up the Vger mess for you, you might as well leave me where I can do the most good because I'll love every minute of it anyway."

"And don't you, Captain?"

"Is that it, Caidan? To make sure I know that I've got the only thing that could make me happy these days and I owe it all to you?"

Caidan smiled in enigmatic silence.

Kirk looked as though he were hearing a disembodied voice. "There's more, isn't there? That's too easy... You...when the reports of the cloud creature started coming in, 'Fleet mobilized with Decker. He'd been trained for the new *Enterprise*. I was an afterthought somehow. But why? You didn't need to reward me further. You'd made me an admiral. And you didn't need me either because Decker knew that ship. He was good. Oh, it's flattering to think they considered me so knowledgeable that even my rusty talents were an asset but now I'm not convinced."

Caidan looked suddenly years older and infinitely more tired. "Since I know enough of you to know you won't let this rest, I shall tell you. But perhaps you should know that it might not let you rest once you hear."

"Either way I won't so it makes little difference."

"Starfleet reinstated you despite the Capella debacle and everything else Chantal involved you in because they were grateful. You know that. If you hadn't spearheaded the attack on Sergering when you did the way you did, it's no secret that Yang would've turned its dual star into a super black hole that would be sucking us all in if that cloned army of his had missed any of us. We're a people that rewards our heroes, Captain. Starfleet suddenly had so much water under her bridge that they could easily forgive and forget the lives lost under your abandoned command on Capella, especially since there's nothing and no one on Capella to remind them anymore."

Kirk refused to twinge visibly at that remark though he bled inside. The Capella debacle was perhaps the only thing he could not forgive Chantal for involving him in. He'd heard the official story - it was tidy and polite, a truly inspired piece of fiction. He had learned that people generally did not want to hear unpleasant truths about the internal workings of state affairs when it concerned anything like this, but he still remembered. Sometimes holding onto the truth about things that happened since he met Chantal was a monumental challenge since the official explanations were always so much simpler for one's conscience to live with.

"However, Captain," he heard Caidan continue, "you know my agency has more problems. You're not one of us and you know too much. If you'd been anyone else, it wouldn't have been difficult to neutralize, shall we say, the potential problem you represent because no one would miss you. But it's difficult to neutralize a cultural hero. We'd hoped you'd enjoy playing admiral and forget all the things you knew about our operations - and they *are* necessary, Captain. The problem was that we didn't know exactly how much you knew, nor *if* you would forget it all voluntarily. The Vger mission was a calculated risk, really. You might have saved the Federation again. Or you might not have come back. Either would've been acceptable since the *USS Columbia* was also waiting in drydock, having been refitted and modified as the *Enterprise* was. If you'd lost your ship and crew, not to mention your life, we'd have had another one out with a man as well-trained as Decker fast enough to do whatever could have possibly been done."

"Are you telling me you sent me out there hoping I wouldn't come back?"

"It's an interesting thought, isn't it?"

"One more question," Kirk asked, caught in the web of emotions that frothed in him now. "Why do you hate me so much? I can almost understand why your agency does, but not you personally. I don't even know you."

"Do you think you're the only man who ever loved her, Kirk? You're not. But you're the only one she ever loved in return."

*"she can't be convicted, she's earned her degree,
and the most she will do is throw shadows at you
'cause she's always a woman to me"*

James Kirk thought he was approaching that fine line between drunk and very drunk indeed. If that were so, he couldn't understand why he still felt so lucid and level-headed. He wondered exactly how many drinks

Paul Caidan had matched him to, then decided it didn't matter.

"I think we ought to have a toast," Caidan said, "to Chantal Caberfae's alumni. We meet once a year in the Van Erhardt Stadium."

Kirk noted that was the most polite thing Caidan had said about Chantal in the last three hours. He wondered why he was getting drunk with a man who admittedly hated him and had even tried to arrange for his untimely demise. The answer announced itself in his head immediately: he's the only person you know who knows where she is.

It was nearly dawn - of that Kirk was certain. Well, as certain, he thought, as he was capable of being about anything in the condition he might be in. He'd lost count of the drinks and finally stopped matching Caidan's. Instead, he played the attentive audience, letting the man just talk, asking carefully constructed questions now and then. But he learned nothing of any relevance and now was beginning to sober up to the point where he was dreading the hangover the apparently futile attempt had earned him.

He thought Caidan had dozed, or maybe he had. Now the other man was looking at him.

"She wasn't for a night," he said, "and that's where I made my mistake. I thought I could take her and forget her."

Kirk almost laughed, remembering a time when those were his exact sentiments.

"I found her, you know," Caidan said, "In a circus. A freak show. She did a number with a lizard that was hot enough to fry your eyeballs from the inside out."

Kirk knew the performance. In the course of his travels with Chantal, he'd had the misfortune to see her do it once. What disturbed him the most was that she had seemed oblivious to it all.

"She was sixteen when I found her. I thought she had something, I told her. I think even *I* believed it. She looked like a scarecrow then, all bones and angles. Her hair was cut short. It took six of the best surgeons the agency could buy and three operations before she was physically able to speak a distinguishable sentence. She was so eager to learn and to please then, like a pet you could train to perform."

Kirk considered what he heard, knowing it all to be true, but it was too inconsistent with his own memories of Chantal for him to take it very seriously.

"I was right, she had something. She was the best. I had one of the most sought-after Delorian courtesans for a mistress and I gave her up, thinking one day Chantal would replace her. Then she told me she loved you."

Kirk ordered himself to feel no sympathy for the other man, then decided charity was not that costly. He knew what it felt like to lose her.

Paul Caidan suddenly looked directly at him, cold sober. "I lied to you, Kirk. I don't know where she is. We know she jumped ship before they crossed the Rim because the Rifferi told us. We haven't heard from her since she left. I could be dramatic and say she might even be dead by now but I don't believe that. I don't doubt for a minute that she's alive somewhere. That's the agony of it. You must know that. That she's alive somewhere and not here. And that she doesn't give a damn, not really, for anything but herself and maybe that insane obsession she has about destroying Yang. It's as though she believed her birthright was to save our galaxy." He stopped and draining his glass, "she can't even save herself."

Hollow inside, Kirk reckoned that he empathized totally. "There's a lot of that going around lately." He reached for the wine bottle and poured what was left into their two glasses. "Drink up, Caidan. I've got to get back to my ship."

"You might remember, *Captain*, he stressed the word icily, "that I am your superior."

"Only in rank, sir, only in rank." Kirk stirred the wine with his forefinger. "And while we're talking so honestly about saving the galaxy and all... You might like to remember that I *did* save the earth from that piece of hardware gone crazy, and not for the first time either."

Caidan tried to interrupt but Kirk went on unheeding. "Now we both know how much pure luck was involved in that, but the Federation High Consul doesn't. Most of Starfleet doesn't, and none of the civilians on earth do either. So I am very popular." He leaned forward intently, speaking quietly through almost clenched teeth. "Very popular. So no more games, Caidan, not with me, not with my ship. We do our job but no more suicide missions."

"Or?" Caidan took a sip of wine.

"What do you mean, or?"



"That kind of statement carries an implied threat. If we don't treat you "properly" what will you do? Resign again? Tell your messy little saga of sex and intrigue to the news syndicates? No one would believe you, you know."

Kirk sat back in his chair and for the first time truly relaxed. "Do you know Mr. Spock, Caidan? No, I don't believe you do. Well, he never liked Chantal, you know, and it was mutual. He saw through her games and defenses, all of her lies. He knew she was working for someone else all along."

"I fail to see--"

"In the last six months we've gotten to know each other again. We've sort of met in the middle in our attitude toward life after all our problems. He's found out that a life without emotion is a desert, and I've found out that too much is a swamp."

"The point, Captain, the point."

"The point is that he knows all about you and your agency's slimy little games. He knows everything I know, and he knows it's true." Kirk stretched slightly, casually. "Now, he's as eager as I am to stay on the *Enterprise* and stay alive. He has some very impressive friends on Vulcan. You know about Vulcan telepaths, Caidan?" He smiled faintly. "And you know that Vulcan sense of honor. If anything were to happen to us, anything out of the ordinary, a lot of people all through the Federation will know all about your government in the shadows. I don't think your boss would like that."

Caidan swallowed convulsively at the thought of Todmeister's reaction to this timebomb if he ever found out. He wasn't called the Deathmaster for nothing. "All right, Kirk, you're safe from us. But not from yourself. You'll start playing hero again and one day--"

"One day," Kirk repeated, punctuating it with a gesture, "but you'd better hope it's a long time off."

Caidan absently watched a bubble in the wine detach itself from the side of the glass and rise to the surface, there to die. "There's none of us leaves this life alive, Kirk," he said.

The Captain smiled a smile with no humor in it. "Well, at least that's one thing I can be happy about."

Caidan's pose of indifference evaporated. "Listen, you son of a whore's sister, you've always had the devil's own luck. If I were you, I'd be grateful--"

Kirk got up abruptly, happy to find his head clear of wine fumes or ghosting memories. "But you aren't me, Caidan, sir, and that's something else I can be happy about."

He was almost out the door before Caidan spoke, wanting the last word. "She always said you were a bastard, Captain."

"Funny," Kirk stopped briefly on his way back to his once and future love, his ship, to give a final thought to a lost one, "she never talked about you at all."

And he was gone.

Caidan sat alone and wondered if Kirk had been telling the truth about anything. Then, deciding that at his current stage in life, he wouldn't recognize the truth if it came in wearing golden wings, picked up his glass and let his mind wander. When the waiter arrived to clear the table he was still sitting there, lost in thought, watching the bubbles burst.

"If people bring so much courage to this world, the world has to kill them to break them, so, of course, it kills them. The world breaks everyone and afterwards many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break, it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry."

*Hemingway
A FAREWELL TO ARMS.*

Memento Mori

Cheryl D.

Rice

Even after all these years, the knife still retained its aura of malignant beauty. The man looked at it sadly as it lay glittering softly on the desk-top. A "personal memento" she had called it. Elaan the beautiful, the treacherous.

He picked up the dainty weapon. . .it seemed impossible that something so exquisite should be so deadly. But then the woman had been like that too. Funny, he could remember the love, the pure animal lust he had felt for her, but it was memory only. As if the entire affair had happened to someone else.

He sighed wearily and ran his fingers through already tousled hair. The news should not have upset him so deeply. . .he hadn't seen or talked to her since the day she had transported from the ship to Troyius. . .the two of them bound by ties of duty and obligation. She was no more than a passenger who had once graced his ship with her presence. A name in a file.

He put the knife down carefully and tried to decide what to do next. It was no use attempting to sleep. . .he had already failed at that task. He could do some reading, but brightening the lights might wake the sleeper in the bed on the other side of the grill behind him. He smiled a little grimly, nothing like his usual infectious grin. Nice someone could get some rest.

What else? He could get dressed and go up to the bridge, but then everyone would wonder what was wrong. Technically, of course, he could go there any time he pleased, but the crew would think there were something amiss if he visited too often in the middle of the night. He glanced at the wall chronometer and sighed. . .not even the middle yet. He couldn't have been asleep more than an hour before something had awakened him. It was going to be a long night.

He leaned back in his chair and again tried to convince himself that the news that had arrived the day before had no special meaning for him. Just the flat announcement that the wife of the ruler of Troyius had died in childbirth and would be interred on her adopted planet. She was survived by eleven children and would be mourned. . .etc.

He shivered a bit and once again thanked whoever was responsible for such things that he had been born male. Eleven children. . .and by a man she had despised. Or at least she had before they were married. She might have learned to be fond of him. The marriage had obviously succeeded in at least one way. But a more non-maternal woman he could not imagine. If she had used the tear-trick on her mate she would have despised him as a victim and if she hadn't he, no doubt, would have despised her as a vicious shrew. But a lovely one. The man remembered almost wistfully the delicate curve of her waist and the entrancing pout of her lips. So all that was gone to dust. . .what a waste.

"Snap out of it," he mentally ordered himself. "Getting maudlin's no help. It's unfortunate, but these things happen. Wasn't your fault."

But somehow, he reminded the more logical part of his nature, any woman he was around seemed fated to end up badly. Not that it was his fault of course, but still. . .it was as if some Fate with a nasty sense of humour had placed more females than he cared to remember in his path only to be knocked down.

It was more coincidence, of course, but unfortunate for all concerned. For *all*. He had not emerged totally unscathed either. His heart had been broken. . .

"Nonsense, Jim. As long as your ship is whole, so is your heart." The voice, cool with its trace of an English accent, came from the shadows to his left. For a moment the man was unsure if it were his own thoughts he had heard, but then the familiar figure detached itself from the clinging dark and strolled into the pool of light that spread about the desk.

"Hello Edith--" he paused while she waved a gloved hand in casual greeting and then settled gracefully into the chair across from him. "But what do you know about my heart? It's been so long. . ."

"Not very. It's only yesterday to you since you let me die. Not," she continued, as he tried to interrupt, "that I blame you. It was a fairly clear-cut choice, especially to someone with your sense of duty. The world may be well lost for love in poetry, but not whole universes in real life. You've blamed yourself for much too long, you know."

The man nodded cautiously, trying to keep his attention focused on the undamaged half of her face. Being run over by a truck never improved anyone's appearance. . . even someone as lovely as she had been. He had a feeling that her sudden presence should be terrifying him but it seemed somehow natural. . . as if it had all happened before. "You're being very reasonable about this." He couldn't keep an edge of wry humor out of his voice.

"Well, that's the way I always was. . . am. A dreamer, but practical. Since I was meant to die anyway it all seems not to matter. Besides you really did care for me. I wasn't one of your passing fancies. Not that there was ever a chance to *let* it pass. You'll grieve for me all the days of your life, see me in your dreams. . . in every other woman. I have no complaints."

While the man thought that one over, the woman's gaze swept over the small cabin, finally coming to rest on the jewelled knife. "Oh, you still have that? Poor Elaan. Now *that* you can't blame yourself for."

The man was shocked by her apparent mind-reading. "I wasn't. . . well, if I hadn't forced her to marry. . ."

"Nonsense," Edith's voice was clipped. "Her duty was clear and so was yours. Peace for two planets was more important certainly than the feelings of two people. She was a scheming spoiled bitch, too. You'd have seen her for the brat she was if you hadn't been drugged by her tears."

"But it's sad. . . for her to die so young."

"She died having her third litter. She simply wasn't built for childbearing. If you believe in such things, Fate never meant her for a long life."

"I was thinking about Fate right before you--er--came in."

"I know." She smiled absently as she slowly pulled off her gloves, finger by finger. "I know everything."

"Really?" He did smile then at her naive claim of omniscience. "Even Spock's never known *everything*."

"Well, Spock isn't dead. I am. I have so much more free time."

"Oh." He could practically feel the alarm bells going off in the back of his head somewhere. But he couldn't seem to concentrate. He shivered again, although he noticed belatedly that he was wearing his usual uniform and the velour shirt was usually enough to keep him warm. It didn't seem likely that he would have gone to bed in uniform, especially when he wasn't alone, but somehow he couldn't remember putting it on. He set the problem aside to be pondered later; right now he was cold. "Excuse me for a moment." He made as to rise, intending to go adjust the cabin's temperature control set in the panel by the doorway to the corridor.

"Never mind, my husband." Yet another feminine figure emerged from shadow. "I will move the lever. . . so. . . now you will be comfortable." She moved into the light smiling shyly at the man and more freely at the other woman.

"Hello. I didn't know if you would visit tonight or not." Edith remarked casually. "But I thought you might, since he's thinking about children."

The newcomer sat down gingerly on the edge of the desk. "Yes, he'd have forgotten me long ago if not for the child. With you it is love. With me, guilt."

The man, feeling as if he were rapidly losing control of the conversation, finally got a word in. "I would *not* have forgotten you, Miramanee. And it isn't fair for you to say that. We were man and wife. . . the only time in my entire life that I've been married. And I have nothing to be guilty about. . . your own people stoned you--us! I tried to protect--"

"That is true," the Indian woman admitted softly. "But it always seemed a bit peculiar to me that his doctor friend could do nothing for me or the child." She was addressing Edith, who listened with evident interest. "Not long before, his Vulcan friend's brain had been replaced surgically, but they did not even *try* to do anything for me. Let me bleed to death. . . and the child."

"Could nothing have been done for the baby. . . even if you. . .?" Edith's voice was deeply sympathetic.

"Again, they didn't try. But I think not. Their science is not advanced enough yet to bring a child to term with machinery and none of the women on this ship would be the kind to make a good host-mother. And

I doubt if my husband would have approved."

"Would you, Jim?" Edith asked the question suddenly, interrupting the thoughts chasing themselves through the man's mind.

"Would I what?" He snapped as his thoughts lost their way again.

She repeated the question.

"No. . .I don't think. . ." he stumbled to a halt, never having given the idea any thought before. He was suddenly embarrassed, and Miramanee tried to put him at ease.

"Do not distress yourself, Kirok. It was all probably for the best. We were happy for several moon changes but it could not have lasted. You were not yourself then. . .you did not even know your own name. I lost you when you regained your memory. . .even if I had not died, I would never have fit into your life. You would have been kind. . .that is your way. . .but you would have left me. This," she threw back the raven hair tumbled around her neck and gestured around the room, "is your wife, your ship. You made your choice and you must live with it. If other have been hurt by your primary devotion, that is to be regretted. But you must not feel guilty."

"It won't work, dear," Edith advised her seriously, "it's part of his basic personality. He is the type who feels guilt over things he shouldn't. He goes ahead and does what he has to, but then it eats him up inside." She reached out and patted the Indian's bare knee. "I've tried to help. . .I even did when I was alive and didn't know who he was, but none of it did much good. Actually I think it's part of what makes him such an effective leader. This crew will follow even the most unpleasant orders willingly because they can tell that he doesn't like it any more than they do."

"Yes, I see. It's sort of like what Elizabeth Debner said. . .'Compassion and command are a fool's mixture' though they can be very effective in the right hands."

"She didn't say that," the man interjected, "it was Gary."

"Yes, you're right." Miramanee gave her agreement and then turned her attention back to the other woman. "I wonder why he is never bothered by the men he's killed or destroyed one way or another."

"There's a streak of chivalry in him. He figures men can take care of themselves, but women are 'weak'. Goes back to his childhood and his mother." Edith broke off and looked out of the corner of her good eye at the man who was playing with the knife again. "But I'll tell you all about that some other time."

"Were there all that many he has to feel guilty about? He's still young. . ."

"He had an early start. There's that Ruth. . . she was an older woman and seduced him. It wasn't his fault she fell in love. Then there's, oh, for example, Areel Shaw."

"Is she dead?"

"No, as a matter of fact she quit Star Fleet and has a private practice and is becoming quite wealthy. But she never married and he believes she still pines for him. He did lead her on a bit. And there's Elaan, even though she asked for everything she got. And Deela. . .he liked her admiration. . .and Miri, and that woman of Mudd's who he encouraged to marry the miner who butchered her in her sleep, and the blond yeoman he used to have." Edith carefully, carefully ticked off each name on her fingers as she mentioned them.

"Funny he doesn't worry about the head nurse and the communications expert. He's around them most of all."

"Well, he's fond of Christine, but he thinks of her as Spock's problem--and that she sort of asks for her hurt feelings, chasing a man who isn't interested. And as for Uhura. . .she's about the



only person on the ship with as strong a personality as his. He's always gone for the vulnerable kind of woman, so she isn't his type at all."

"Now wait a minute!" The man finally came to life. "I wish you would stop this psychoanalysing and talking about me as if I weren't here." He suddenly remembered why things were wrong. "This is my personal cabin and you did not ask permission to come barging in here and I want you to leave." He stood up and motioned towards the door.

"We never ask, Jim." Edith was obviously not impressed by his command voice and manner. "We come because you want us. All of us."

"All?" He noticed that other shadow-figures were walking toward him from the left. Soon he would be surrounded. "Edith. . ." There was a trace of pleading in his voice. "It's late and this isn't doing anybody any good. Have some pity."

"I would, but *you* won't." She stood up and faced him across the desk, then began to walk through it. "But *we* forgive you--or would if there was anything to forgive. You've always done what you had to do."

"Yes I have!" He was suddenly both furious and frightened. "I have my ship. I have her and myself. I'm all right. I don't need you, any of you." He turned to the other phantoms. "Go away, leave me alone!"

They obligingly began to fade and he looked back at Edith who was now standing directly in front of him. Instinctively he stepped back.

"I'll leave, Jim, since you want it. And we'll see what you have left."

She faded slowly, with a certain grace. Just as he was beginning to relax, his feelings changed to terror. The floor beneath his feet began to dissolve, as did the walls, and the ceiling over his head seemed to turn to clear glass.

The stars blazed fiercely around him as he started to fall. Faster and faster. He tried to call out but there was no air. Faster and faster. His heart beat. His body fell and swirled sickeningly. Faster. . . he had heard a person could die from sheer fright but he had never believed it until now. He thought his lungs, his heart would burst.

Then, just when things could get no worse, they did. The stars began to go out. Not like electric globes, but like candles snuffed out by a raging wind.

And still he fell. . .lost and alone. With no company but his thoughts and his fears. Time past, time passing, time wasted. Facing a starless future.

Jim Kirk awoke, safe and secure in his own bed, with a start. For a moment he lay in the dark listening to the thud of his heart and trying to remember what had awakened him.

"Must have been a beaut," he mused, trying to relax. The dream, if that was what it had been, had faded. All he could remember was people who shouldn't have been there and something about the stars going out. Crazy stuff.

The Captain shook his head. . .must have been something he'd eaten. Everything was all right now. His heartbeat was gradually easing. Time to go back to sleep. Ship-morning would be coming soon and it wouldn't do for him to be tired because a bad dream had kept him up like a child afraid of the dark. He was *not* afraid of the dark. . .but he wasn't sleepy either.

However, he was uncomfortably warm--maybe that was part of the problem. Kirk disentangled himself from the bedding and walked over to the temperature control panel near the door. For some reason it was set too high. He readjusted the controls to a more comfortable level and, wide awake now, padded barefoot over to his desk.

The dim light he always left on showed him the usual landscape of the office portion of his quarters. He sat down in the chair behind the desk and absently drummed his fingers on the top. He checked the time. . .middle of the night-watch. . .far too early to get up. No books to read--nothing to do. He leaned back in the chair and stretched lazily. Still too warm. Even though he was dressed only in pajama bottoms the room was uncomfortably warm. . .almost smothering.

A fragment of the dream returned. . .stars going out. As rebuttal he turned on the intercom screen to show the view from the main screen on the bridge. The usual, reassuring starfield spread out before him. Things were obviously going along normally as the *Enterprise* cruised on its way to. . .where were they going?

Kirk's mind halted for a moment. Of course he knew their current destination. . .he always knew. . . somehow it had just slipped his mind.

He rubbed his forehead trying to remember, then noticed the knife on the shelf behind him. The Captain picked up the dainty weapon. . .he had had trouble believing the news they had received the day before. . . so Elaan was dead. So sad. But she had only been a passenger--no reason for him to feel guilty.

"Put the knife down slowly, Captain. I know how to use this."

Kirk's head turned so quickly it was a miracle it didn't snap off. Too astounded to be afraid, he suddenly found himself looking down the barrel of an old-style phaser being held by a wild-eyed blonde. "Now, what the--What are you doing here? Give me that."

"Not so fast." The girl's aim shifted from his head to his chest and he settled back in his chair. "You thought you'd gotten rid of me. . .us, didn't you? But not yet, not yet." Her voice was soft, almost crooning.

Kirk's thoughts raced frantically. He had no idea what was going on, but the last time he had seen this figure she had been intent on murder. . .his. It seemed her ambition had not changed much in the interim.

"Why would I want to be rid of you? We were such good friends." His voice fairly dripped sweet reasonableness. If he could only distract her for a moment and make a grab for the weapon. . .

"Such friends!" Her tone was pure contempt. "You used me to try and trap my father Caesar." She tossed the long hair out of her eyes. "But you failed and so did the others. I will always protect him." Her blue-green eyes became vague and her voice shivery. "You'll pay, *Captain*." She made the title a deadly insult. "You'll pay. All your power won't save you. But in remembrance of how much you enjoyed my acting, or said you did, I will dedicate a poem to you before I use the phaser."

The girl struck a tragic pose, but still kept an eye on the man before her. "This would seem to fit your circumstances very nicely somehow. . ."

'He lay him lightly, lightly down
between the dark and morrow.
He took him lightly, lightly up
but he was dead with sorrow.' . . ."

"You'd have done better to stick with Shakespeare, Lenore." A figure came from the shadows as the girl whirled in surprise. In one swift motion, the newcomer snatched away the phaser and pushed its previous owner into a nearby chair. "Hello, Jim. You should be more careful."

Kirk was somehow not surprised that his saviour was--or appeared to be, he amended hastily--Edith Keeler. She had always wanted to help. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"That isn't very polite, Jim. You could at least say thank you."

While he automatically murmured his appreciation, the woman-figure laid the gun on the desk and walked over to check on the girl. "That's better. Jim, you'll need more chairs; there may be quite a crowd."

Kirk stared at her in amazement, for once in his life momentarily speechless. Who was this person? It was all crazy. If he hadn't been convinced that he was fully awake he would have surreptitiously pinched himself to be sure. But this was real. The cabin was as familiar to him as his own face. . .the books and plants on the shelf behind him, the solid feel of the chair, the quiet hiss of the air intake. This was his home, his ship. But who was this person, this *thing* with him? Oh, it looked like Edith. . .even sounded like her. But he had left the real one dead on a street hundreds of years in the past.

"Look, I don't know who you are or what you think you're doing in my cabin, but I want answers and I want them now."

"Always in charge, aren't you, Jim?" Edith gazed at him fondly. . .with the eye that had emerged from the accident in working order. "And each time you react to me differently. Sometimes I wish you could remember. . ."

"Enough of this double-talk." Kirk stood up, furious. "Who *are* you two?"

"You tell me." The woman's voice was as hard as his. "We are what we appear to be. Don't you know her?" She motioned with a gloved hand towards the girl.

Kirk walked over to get a closer look. It was, or seemed to be, Lenore Karidian, all right. Dressed exactly as she had been the last time he had seen her. A pretty figure of disheveled femininity, all ribbons and flowers, dainty braids and flowing skirts. He tipped her face up gently; the eyes were glazed, the pupils pinpoints, and she was muttering what sounded like poetry. Something told him she was irredeemably

mad.

The dark woman behind him offered, "She was destroyed when she was twelve and found that the father she worshipped had once been a mass murderer. The only way she could live with the knowledge was to blame everyone else. It was not your fault."

The Captain stroked the gleaming hair. "But she thought I just led her on to get to her father."

"Did you?"

For the first time in years he considered the matter carefully. "Yes, in part. But I did care. . ."

"Good. You have to be more honest with yourself--"

"Wait a minute!" His thoughts returned to the present. "This is some sort of trick. If you don't tell me what's going on I'm going to call Security."

"Call them." Edith was completely indifferent.

Kirk reached over and punched the intercom. It was dead. Totally. "All right, you've rigged that somehow. I'm going for help."

"If you must." The woman seemed intent on straightening the folds of her cape. "But you'll be sorry."

"I'll be. . ." He stormed across the room, waiting to see if she would make any move to stop him. She did not.

Sparing a quick thought that it wasn't good for Command image to be parading the corridors in his pajamas, he stepped up to the door. It opened promptly and he stepped . . . into absolute nothingness.

No comforting familiar corridor. No people. Not even an alien scene. Nothing.

For a terrifying moment that lasted a millisecond or a millenium he was confronted by what could not be. He could almost feel his sanity losing its moorings and oozing away.

There was nothing out there. . .no light, but no dark. No quiet, no sound. But out of the corner of his eye there lurked colors that sang and sounds that cavorted like imaginary animals. For the first time he understood how the sight of a Medusan could cause madness. The brain can only accept so much.

Then somehow the doors wished shut and he was safely back home in his own quarters. For a moment he leaned against the blessed solidity of the wall and tried to forget. But when he closed his eyes all he could see was what lay outside.

Kirk finally opened them wearily to see Edith standing before him radiating sympathy. "Now you see. I told you, but you never listen."

He nodded dumbly, far beyond fear. A part of him was not surprised to see that he was now in uniform. "What do you want of me?" By a supreme effort of will, he kept all trace of a wail from his voice.

"For you to really listen. To really believe that you are not responsible for everything bad that happens to the women around you."

He walked stiffly away from the door, noting without surprise that there was a figure asleep in the bed. . .another James T. Kirk.

However, Lenore was gone. He looked a question at Edith, who appeared to understand with no difficulty. "For the moment at least, you are at peace with yourself over her."

Kirk then noticed the phaser still on the desk. "I suppose this is some kind of trick too." He turned the controls to stun and aimed at the Edith-figure.

She was fumbling with something in her purse. "See, if you must."



He fired. . .to no effect. . .then frowned and set it on a higher level. The man aimed casually at a chair, which promptly glowed and vanished.

Kirk put the weapon down and faced his visitor calmly. "I'm really in for it, aren't I?" Whatever she was. . .alien illusion, figment of a diseased imagination, some sort of test, or the real Edith. . . she was here and she was in charge.

Edith, whatever the truth, smiled sadly. . .the undamaged half of her face angelic. "Yes, I am afraid that until you can learn to accept things as they are. . ."

"I can accept anything." Then he added to himself, "except the loss of the *Enterprise*."

She smiled again and handed him a small mirror from her purse. "One thing at a time, Jim. Right now you might like to tidy up a little. . .there's blood. . ."

Kirk took the proffered mirror and looked at his familiar face. Beads of sweat hung on his forehead like seed pearls and his upper lip was cut on the inside and the blood was staining his teeth. He had to think for a moment how he had injured himself. Then he realized that he had pressed his face so hard against the door on his return from the horrors outside that he had actually broken the skin. Quickly he wiped away the blood and sweat, pulled his uniform straight and gave the mirror back to the woman. "Better now?"

She reached out a hand to smooth back a lock of hair and he managed not to flinch. Whatever this apparition was. . .she meant him no harm. And this close, he could almost relax for a moment and believe it was the true Edith brought back to him, somehow. The light blue hat was the same, the voice, the expression. . .only now the lovely wide eyes were like dark wounds on her ravaged face and he had done that. . . even though he would have given his soul not to have been forced into the action.

She moved away. "Are you ready for more visitors?" At his nod of agreement she motioned and again figures began to slip in from the dark. Miramanee. . .a vision in skins, Losira. . .sad-faced beauty. His mother. . .she had never wanted him or Sam to go into space and she blamed him for his brother's death.

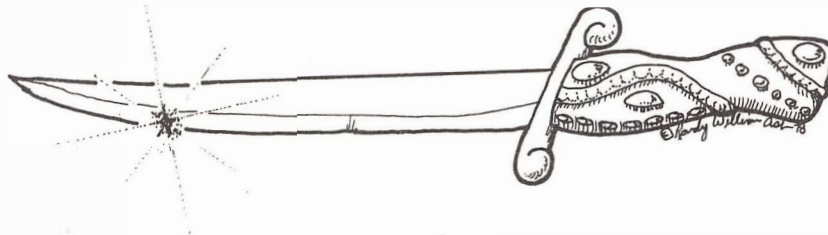
Kirk sighed and looked at the chronometer. It was exactly one second later than the last time he had checked. . .a lifetime ago, it seemed.

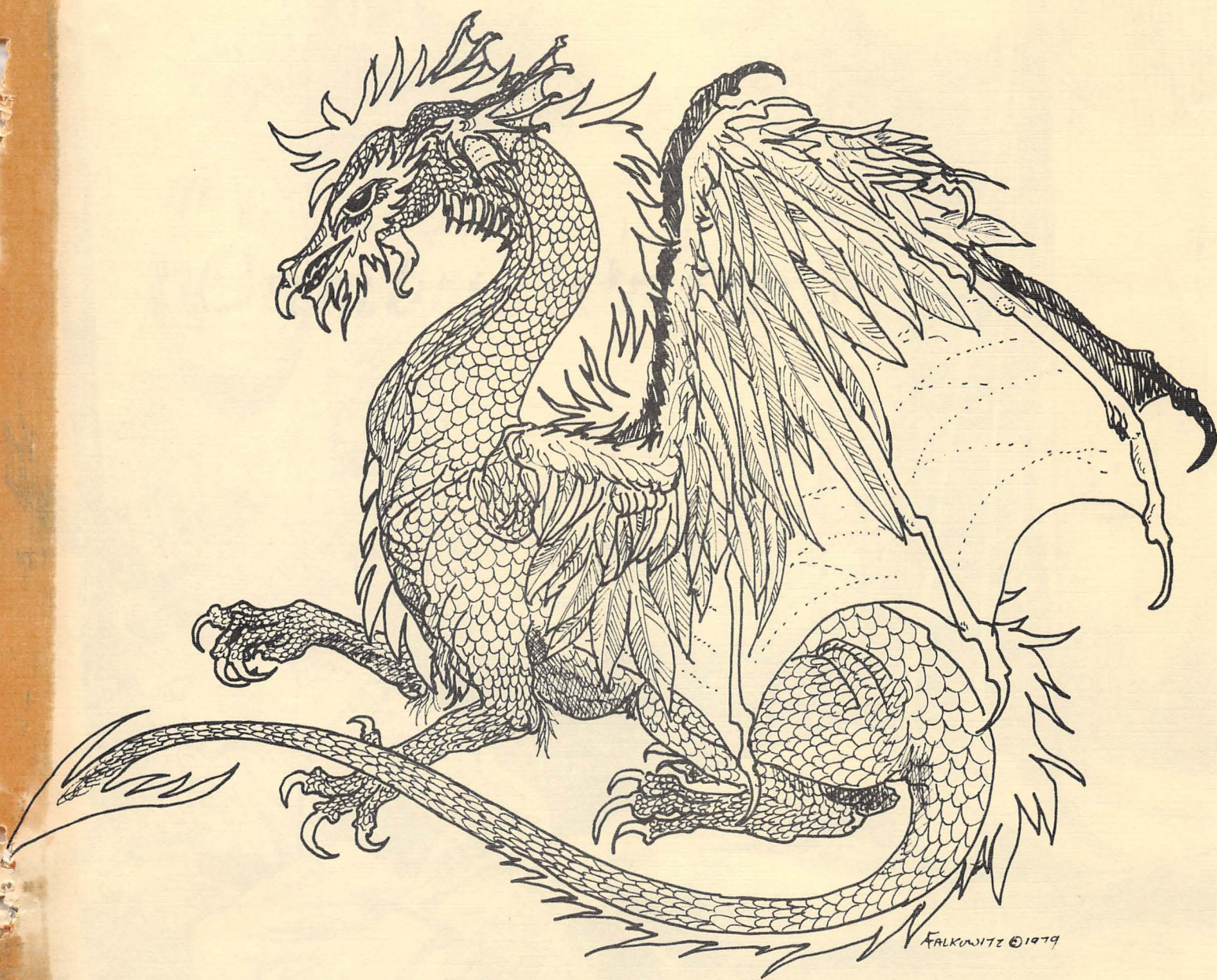
And still they came. But this time around he didn't let himself be forced into a corner. This time the ghosts would be defeated. Or, he knew, that Kirk on the bed would wake up in his turn to find a cool room with a chair missing.

The cabin was full now, but they seemed to be waiting. . .

Kirk turned to the rear and saw the outlines of a latecomer. He remembered how she had killed herself and his stomach turned as he anticipated what horror he was about to see.

Looking into the sad/mad eyes of Janice Lester, he realized what an awfully long night this was going to be.







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